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A Draught of the Blue



By F. W. BAIN

Translated from the Original Manuscripts

A Digit of the Moon

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from the Hindu

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A Draught of the Blue

Together with

An Essence of the Dusk

Translated from the Original Manuscripts

By

F. W. Bain

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A Draught of the Blue

(अहिपीदिताचन्द्रिका)

Translated from the Original Manuscript

(पुष्करेक्षणांगदा)

अम्बादम्बरसास्वादः को हि रम्भेद्रसान्तरि

Ah! lotus infinite! ah! wild sweet Blue!
Sense, in thy azure ocean dipped, must die.

Desiderio

Introduction

THE sun goes down, for those alone, who stand on a revolving sphere: and so, in Nature's universal life, Death is but a dissolving view, a word without a meaning: real only to the accidental unit, to whose local and momentary combination it sets a term. Death is a thing of nought, phenomenal, kaleidoscopic: a juggle of the Mother of Illusion, Prakriti or Máyá, whose magic scene not only never dies, but like her own wild animals, sleeps even with an open eye. You never catch her napping. And often, when you think that you have done it, she winks at you, just as it were to show you your mistake. As sometimes, on a hot midsummer day, when the delicate blue smoke from cottage chimneys rises straight into the air, and Nature holds her breath: you think, she is asleep: and all at once, there comes a little whisper, and a ripple passes over all the golden ears of corn, and in another

moment, all is still. Or on a cliff that overhangs a glassy sea, you lie and dream, and think, the very water sleeps: and then, a sudden change of colour flushes the ocean opal for only a single instant, and is gone. Or in a wood at noon, you listen to the silence, and a rustle suddenly quivers in the trees, and dies away. Murmurs and echoes: moments and emotions of the pulses of the world: hints and indications, still, small voices more significant than storms, of the never-sleeping thrill and throb of universal action.

"*Every tremor gravitation excites in any planet is immediately transmitted to the farthest limits of the system, in oscillations corresponding in their periods with the causes that produce them, like sympathetic notes in music, or vibrations from the deep tones of an organ. . . . The human frame may be regarded as an elastic system, the different parts of which are capable of receiving the tremors of elastic media, and of vibrating in unison with their innumerable undulations.*"

So far sober modern science, never dreaming

that it is exactly reproducing (translate the thing only from physics into ethics) the old Hindoo idea, that moral conservation of energy, whose fundamental axiom it is, that no ACTION, good or bad, however small, is or ever can be lost, but like a stone thrown into the water, generates innumerable consequences, running in all directions to infinity, producing permanent impressions and effects, that follow and fatally determine, eternal and indelible, the fortunes of their DOER, through the series of interminable births and deaths: births that are no beginning, and deaths that are not an end. Thus do we go on making for ourselves our weal or woe: and as we go, *the hounds of deeds long buried in oblivion are on our track.*

Doubtless a little story might have a more delicious name than the one before us: but doubtless it never had. We may understand it either of a young woman or the moon: and in either case, it means more things than one.

I. *The new moon, seen for a single instant,*

in the sky, or *on the lotus,* or *on the forehead of Maheshwara.* II. *A beauty with eyes like a great blue lotus,* or *the colour of heaven.* For all these things have a quality in common, the mystic blue.

Strange, how deep an impression the colour *blue* seems to have made upon the Indian mind. Gods and peacocks, creepers and lotuses, clouds and pools and skies and seas, elephants and maidens' glances are all mixed up together in their language by their "participation" in this "Platonic idea," this transcendental blue. Something of this, indeed, is readily intelligible in every land: but in India, it is more so. The blue is bluer, there. *Wouldst the poet understand, Travel in the poet's land.* I will not say, with Goethe, Kenst thou that land: but simply tell the reader something that I saw at Mahabaleshwar in 1903.

The month of May, and with it, the hot weather, was drawing to a close. The woods were green, but very, very dry, and all their

ferny fringes by the red road-sides were parched and powdered thick with ruddy dust. Each morning, when I stood in my verandah, looking down the valley, I could see a floor of cloud, now rolled out like a table-cloth, now tossing like a troubled sea, now floating, wreath on wreath, like a ballet dancer's gauzy flounces, half opaque and half transparent, over the distant Konkan, three thousand feet and more below, waiting for the rising sun to touch it with a rosy blush and kiss it, into invisibility. And every evening, just as he went away, the hot haze hanging like a filmy veil about the hills thickened back into solidity, and beautiful cold mists, reborn, rolled swiftly up the valley, blotting out the picture, and hiding all with their ghostly shifting curtain. And so, from morn to night, and night to morning, it went on, till lines of bullock carts began to gather and wander down the hill, and people were preparing to pack and flit and vanish: for the monsoon was approaching, when no one not a native of those parts can remain upon the hill, unless he wishes to go mad.

And then it began to rain. Suddenly, like the Day of Judgment, there fell from the sky in a solid lump rain, like no rain that I had ever seen before, with the roar of an avalanche and the thunder of Indra and lightning that hissed like a serpent, crashing and smashing down on the roof as if it would break it in. It was dark at midday, and deadly cold, for there went up a mist from the earth, to meet the flood from heaven, making as it were a solid wall through which it was impossible to see a yard. There was nothing to be done but to sit and wait. So for five nights and days that angry rain raged and hammered upon the earth, and tore her with savage fury, growing fiercer as it went on[1]: till all at once, just as though the gates above had been suddenly shut, it stopped, as abruptly as it had begun, about five in the afternoon.

I went out, and wandered slowly up the hill. The air was soft, and quite warm, and

[1] In but a part of the last night, there fell *eight inches and a half* of rain! Time for time, Mahabaleshwar can probably laugh at Cherrapunji. The valleys are scooped out as if with a trowel.

heavy with the smell of smells, the fragrance of fresh earth. Here and there, the paths were gone, washed clean away, looking like red skeletons of their former selves, with rock for bones, all their earthy covering gone. And here and there, a little off the road, a pale orchid sheltered beneath a bough, or a dainty cobra-lily, nestling snug under an overhanging trunk, peeped with incomparable shy reserve through some dark vista in the trees. A mongoose ran across the road, stopped, just half-way, to stare for an instant at me with its startled weasel eye, and leaped into cover on the opposite side.[1] In a few minutes I gained a point of view, and turned to look,—over a sea of green, and what a green!

For every leaf on every tree was washed and wet, and glistened as if coated with fresh paint. The rich glow of a yellow evening sun deepened and intensified the wonderful red colour of patches of naked rock, raw scars laid bare by little slips of land on places on the

[1] This mongoose was, no doubt, wondering "what the devil I did there": for during the rains he and his fellows have the hillsides entirely to themselves.

hill. Cascades of water shot spouting and splashing into the valleys from innumerable scarps and shelves along the heights; and as I listened, I could hear the streams, hidden in the dense foliage, rushing and gurgling down the steep slopes, carrying with them as they went all the loose soil and pebbles they could find. And all along the ridges of the hills, to right and left, on Elphinstone and Lodwick points, hung brooding enormous masses of white cloud, the purest, the strangest, the most indescribably magnificent and beautiful clouds that I ever saw, whiter than snow, brighter than polished silver, save only where their lower edges were charged with heavy rain, fleeces of colossal milk-white rams, dipped by the master painter, Deity, in giant vats of purple ink. Down and away below them the staircase of the Ghauts, long lines of broken hill, were stepping away into the plain, with every distant detail sharp and clear, cut as it were in copper, till all merged in the far horizon, on which a *blink* of burnished gold flashed back from the unseen sea, lying right

in the eye of the setting sun. I listened, and in the silence, broken only by the *ruckle* of the rushing water, somewhere away upon the hill, I heard a cock crow. And at that moment, right above me, I looked and saw: a mass of shining cloud swung slowly open, and through the gap, in the deep abyss of heaven, appeared a spot, a panel, a little lozenge, of blue: pure, unsullied, silent, elemental, Indian blue.

There, there, was the unearthly colour, the colour of the mystic lotus, and the long-eyed languishing Indian Gods. I knew in that instant what Kálidás meant, when he compared the virtue of the just to a patch of heaven fallen down to earth, the blue celestial leaven in this world of frenzied storm and weeping rain. There was the azure paradox, the blue that is all but black, dark, transparent, clear as crystal, shut out from eyes that live in plains by earth's encircling fog. But *over every mountain is peace,* and the kosmic blue.

MAHABALESHWAR,
April, 1905.

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Note.—The words below the Vignette may be thus translated :

Earth, the Root, and Heaven, the Hue;
Marsh of Mire, and Flower of Blue;

Prologue

A Dead Lotus

A Dead Lotus

I

To the pitchy dark of that awful wood,[1] *where plunging Ganges lost her way through a night of a thousand years: when the lonely Moon turned ashy pale, mocked by a million moons that danced in the hollows of the rushing waves: we bow.*

On the edge of the great southern forest, there lived, a thousand years ago, an aged King and Queen, who counted all the world as grass, for want of a son and heir. And finding all other methods fruitless, in the end they gave themselves wholly up to meditating, night and day, on the sole of the Great God's foot: until at last Maheshwara felt pity for that childless couple, and revealed himself to them both at once, in a double dream. So when he asked them what they wanted, the

[1] The hair of Shiwa, who caught the Ganges as it fell from heaven upon his head. It took the river a thousand years to find its way out.

King asked simply for a son. But the Queen, being smitten with deep devotion at the sight of the Great God's moonlit hair, exclaimed: O Boon Giver, let my son resemble thee, were it only in a single fraction of an atom of his being. Touch me now with the very end of one of thy tangled locks of hair, and so shall I become instinct with a tiny portion of thy divinity. Then said Shiwa to himself: Even a single jot of me will be much too powerful for the rest of this human being's substance, and disturb the balance of the whole. But be it as this mother wills. For she has made her choice, and I granted the boon beforehand.[1] And I can see that he has to dree the weird[2] of his former births.

Then he took from his head a single hair, and broke it off, and placed it in her hand. And then he disappeared, and that royal pair awoke, and eagerly compared their dreams, which corresponded in every particular. And

[1] *Θεὸς ἀναιτίος, αἰτία δ' ἑλομένου.*

[2] I must ask the reader to excuse me for using a Scottish expression, for there is no English equivalent. It means to work out the fate that is laid upon him by what has been done in a previous existence.

when they looked, lo! shut fast in the hand of the Queen was a single hair, that glowed like a wire of flame.[1]

Then full of joy, they worshipped the God: and they placed that hair in a golden shrine, and built around it a temple. And when in course of time the Queen gave birth to a son, they called him by a suitable name, Rudrálaka.[2] And as the baby became a child, he did not belie his name. For his thick dark hair was shot with a tinge of gleaming red, and in the sun it shone like fire, and it resembled the mane of a horse. And as the boy became a man, his strength became prodigious; and his passions were wild and furious and proportioned to his strength. And he was as unruly and unmanageable as a young colt of high spirit, and so full of wayward obstinacy and headstrong self-will, that his father said in private to his mother: Now, but that the hair in thy hand was red, this son of

[1] The English reader should know, not only that the Great God's hair is red or tawny, but that he has in his nature a strain of wildness, something on the border-land of insanity.

[2] *The hair*, or *the abode, of Shiwa.*

thine would seem to take after, not the Great God himself, but his bull.[1]

And when his manhood was complete, like a river in flood in the rainy season, it overflowed all common bounds. And he ran wild among men and women, overcoming all the men in every feat of strength and agility, and like a great black bee in a flower garden, rifling all the women of their honey and their hearts and their good behaviour, and playing havoc among them, till the mischief created by his own red hair began, as it were, to turn that of his father and mother white. Then they said: Come, we will marry him, and then no doubt he will settle down and become clear, like strong wine after fermentation, and turn into a pillar of his family and the state. But as soon as they proposed it, Rudrálaka laughed in their faces. And he exclaimed: Who carries a flower, when it is faded, and what are women but flowers, fit only to be gathered, in the moment of their bloom, and worn for an hour and thrown away? And he is wise,

[1] Nandi, whose hair is white.

who knows how to get from the bee its honey, and yet elude its sting. Now a maiden is all honey, but a wife is a buzzing sting. Moreover, women are like mountains, and like snakes, and fire, and the mirage, beautiful in the distance, and the further off, the better: and like them, rugged, and biting, and burning, and luring to destruction all who come too near. But of all things this is worst, that every woman wishes, like a king, to reign alone, and is utterly unable to endure the very name of rival, even in her dreams: so that every husband has in his wife, either a despotic tyrant, or an exasperated foe, whom nothing can appease or soothe but absolute submission. And thus his life is sapped and sucked and drawn into the being of his wife, till it wholly disappears, like that of a noble tree, embraced and treacherously kissed into a premature decay by a beautiful and clinging creeper. And no matter how glorious the flower, I will not be the tree: nor would I buy a wife, were she ten thousand times more beautiful than Rádhá, by the slavery even of a single day.

And what is the need to pay so dear for things that are always ready to give themselves away for nothing, and would rather give themselves away than be bought at any price? For women are always longing to give themselves away, and care only for men that they do not know: being forgetful of all kindness, and unbound by obligation, and seeing in their husband nothing but his faults; while every passing stranger has their heart, as soon as he appears, just as long as he is strange. For Love is himself a stranger, and cannot become familiar without ceasing to be Love: and women live for Love alone, being, like flowers, nothing but his instruments: and he is like the amber, and they are like the grass.

So when they found that, in spite of all that they could say, he would not be persuaded, but that the more they tried, the harder grew his obstinacy, his parents gave it up. And soon afterwards, their hearts broke with grief, and they died, leaving him unmarried, and fearing for him, and the kingdom, and their ancestors, and themselves, lest all

should go to ruin by reason of the incorrigible perversity of this cutter of their race's stalk.[1]

And then, just as though he had only waited for their death, no sooner had his two parents gone away on the great road, than this marriage-hating son of theirs went hunting in the forest. And he rode a horse of spirit like his own, which after a while broke from control and fled at full speed, carrying him in an instant out of sight of all his attendants. And it brought him, deep in the heart of the wood, to his destiny, in the form of a woman, the daughter of an old ascetic, whose beauty, like a deadly snake, bit and slew, in a single moment, his antipathy to the state of marriage, by the poison of its childlike charm. And utterly beside himself, he wooed her then and there, and brought her home on his own horse, and made her his wife and Queen. And she changed him so completely, that he to whom a wife was slavery, became a woman's willing slave: so much so, that he

[1] Because, as Lucian said, without an heir to perform the due ceremonies, the unfortunate shades would have to go hungry and thirsty.

could not bear to let her out of his sight even for a single instant. And he became, like an image of Arddhanárí,[1] inseparable from his wife, holding her in his arms night and day, and chafing, like a wild animal kept without food in a cage, if she left him only to drink water. And the God of the flowery bow laughed, to see his infatuation; and he said softly to himself: A converted scoffer is, after all, the best adorer: for even a very clever swan would fail to separate this milk-and-water.[2] But the King's subjects were overjoyed; and they said: Now, then, his parents will be happy. And if his passion is so violent, that at present he utterly neglects his kingly duties, no matter. For when it has become cool, he will be the very crest-jewel of his race.

And then, while he was entirely bewitched and enthralled by his passion for his new young moon of a bride, some neighbouring kings, his hereditary enemies, hearing of his

[1] Shiwa and Párwatí combined.

[2] *Kshira nira, milk-and-water*, is a technical term in Hindoo erotics for a very close embrace. The swan is credited by Hindoo poets with the power of separating the two: a curious idea, of which it is not easy to see the origin.

condition, and seizing their opportunity, combined together, and attacked him. And after a while, his subjects on the frontier, being ruined, paid no taxes. So driven by necessity, he said to his wife, with a sigh: There is no help for it, and now I must absolutely leave thee for a little while, to pull these thorns up by the roots: for if not, the kingdom will be destroyed. Yet only for a very little while: for I will return almost before I have started. And collecting his army, he put himself at its head, and threw himself upon those kings, and scattered them like leaves in a storm of wind, and reduced them to beg for mercy: for he was beside himself with rage, seeing in them not so much enemies of his kingdom as causes of his unwilling separation from his wife. And having speedily gained his object, he sent relays of horses, and posted them at intervals all the way from his camp to his capital. And then at last, one morning, he mounted a horse, and started with but one attendant, and a heart on fire, to return to his wife.

So they rode, all day long, at full speed: stopping only as long as was necessary to let them leap from one horse to another, as if wishing to rival the sun in his course; till that unhappy companion of the King was almost dead from fatigue, for he was not supported like his master by the burning desire to arrive. But the King rode on as it were in a dream, seeing nothing before him but the edge of the far horizon, and the image of his wife beyond. And so the day went by, and as the sun was going down, they drew near to the capital, and saw its walls before them, away on the distant plain. And the King uttered a shout, and he drove his spurs deep into the flanks of his flying horse, and left his follower far behind. And he rode into the city like a whirlwind, and dashed through its streets, scattering the people, and spurning them as it were from his horse's hoofs. And he reached his palace, and rode through the gates into the court, and threw himself to the ground. And he stood on the palace steps, and called aloud with a joyous voice: Ho! go quickly, and tell the

Queen that the King has come, and waits only for her permission, to kneel at her lotus-feet.

Then the guards, who stood around, gazed at the King and at each other, in silence and dismay. And as they waited, there came to the King an old chamberlain, who stood before him with joined hands, and stooping; and his face was grey with fear. And he said, with a shaking voice: Let the King show mercy. Has he not met the couriers? The Queen died of a burning fever, only three days ago.

And the King fell to the earth, as though one had struck him on the head with an iron club.

II

And they took him up, and carried him in, and laid him on a bed. And there he remained, like a dead man, and for so long, that they begun to doubt whether he were not dead indeed. But at last, the physicians by their remedies brought him back to the body. But his reason had fled. For he raved and fought, struggling with the strength of a giant, and biting like a wild beast, tearing his own hair, and shouting for his wife. And he threw himself upon his attendants, and handled them so that they feared for their lives: and he ran through the palace hunting for his wife, and calling her by name. And when he could not find her, he fell on all whom he met, and beat them, and came so near to killing many, that at last his ministers took counsel, and caused him to be bound. So after raging for many days, taking neither food nor drink, he fell into a burning fever, as if he wished to follow his wife by

the very road she went herself; and he lay for many weeks on the very threshold of the door of death. But his strength was such that he could not die. And so, after a long while, he came back, very slowly, and as it were against his will, to life and to himself: and little by little recovered health, and took once more to his kingly duties, and the bearing of the burden of the state. But it was, as if his better part had died, refusing to be parted from his wife, in the other world, and leaving behind in this only so much of his soul as was necessary to enable him to live at all. For he never moved from his palace, roaming about its rooms, always silent, and always alone, with his head sunk down upon his breast, and his sad eyes fixed upon the ground: and over his dark face there never passed the whiteness of a smile: for his dead wife's shadow lay across it, and her figure moved before him night and day; and her sweetness, not to be forgotten, and never to return, rankled in his heart like a thorn, and goaded it, and gnawed it, and festered in his soul: and sleep forsook his eyes,

which were wild, and haggard, and such that all who saw them feared him, and were wary in his presence: for every now and then he broke out into paroxysms of grief mixed with laughter, during which he seemed, as it were, not to know what he was doing, and was as dangerous to approach as a wild mother elephant robbed by hunters of her calf. And so he lived, and months went by, and the grey hairs came before their time and settled in his head, and sowed as it were its fire with the ashes of grey grief: and age saw her opportunity, and began unheeded and unhindered to furrow wrinkles in his brow, and dig deep corners at the ends of his stern shut lips.

III

Now it happened, on a day, when the Great God was roaming through the sky with Umá in his arms, that they passed close by the moon. And suddenly, they heard in the stillness a mournful voice, like the note of a *chakrawáki* bewailing her lost mate, exclaiming at intervals: Alas! alas! So they stopped and alighted on the surface of the cold-rayed orb, and wandered about in his camphored air, guided by the sound, till they came all at once upon a Siddhá.[1] And she was sitting under a sandal tree, leaning her head against the trunk, with large tears in her great blue eyes, and a cloud of dark dishevelled hair floating about her bare white bosom, whose two colossal pearls rose and fell, heaving and fretting as if regretting their absent ocean home. Then filled with compassion and curiosity, Umá

[1] The moon, according to some philosophers, is the home of those *pure spirits*, who have purged themselves in former births sufficiently to deserve a certain grade of beatitude or bliss.

exclaimed: What can be the meaning of this sighing Siddhá? And Maheshwara divined the truth. But he said: Ask her. Thereupon Párwatí said: O thou lotus lady, what is thy trouble? And the Siddhá said: O Daughter of the Mountain, I have attained, by superfluity of merit, to this position of a Siddhá, which notwithstanding is only a grief and no pleasure to me. For I remember my former birth, and I can see my husband, sorrowing for my absence away below. And now I would give all that remains of my unexhausted stock of accumulated merit for a single moment of the time that is past, did it last no longer than the twinkling of an eye. For what is the use of my Siddháhood, or anything else, without my lord? Or why am I cursed with reminiscence, and not rather rewarded with oblivion? For memory binds my soul, and links it like a red hot chain to the burning fire of a dead delight.

Then Párwatí said in private to the God: Canst thou not do something for this lovely Siddhá? And Maheshwara replied: This is

the nature of women, that for the sake of their single lover, they would annihilate the three worlds. But what has pity to do with the constitution of the universe? Or how can time return again, and all be thrown into confusion, simply to allow two foolish lovers to meet once more? So there is nothing whatever to be done. But Párwatí coaxed him and cajoled him, knowing the power of her two white arms, until at last he said: Since I can refuse thee nothing, and thou art absolutely set upon it, I will, to please thee, cause these two unhappy persons to re-enact their little drama, and taste again the nectar of that love which they so much regret: but only in a dream. For dreams were established by the Creator for this very reason, that a remedy might be found for the irrevocable nature of reality. For that must be as it has been, and cannot be recalled or changed: but anything may happen in a dream. And yet, this pair of lovers would be wiser, were they content to let alone, and leave things as they are. For they will but make their misery more, by the

very means they wish to take to lessen and remove it. But be that as it may.

And then, he cast upon the Siddhá a kindly glance. And he said: Silly child, that wouldst be wiser than those who framed the three great worlds, be now consoled. Thou shalt, at least, have thy way, for a little while, and meet the lord of thy heart again, halfway between heaven and earth.

And hearing this, the Siddhá fell before him, and took his foot, and kissed it, and placed it in her bosom. And she said: O saviour of the shipwrecked that are sinking in the waves of time, O send me thy succour soon, for I am like one dying of thirst in the desert for the blue water of my husband's arms.

IV

And at that very moment, the King her husband on the earth was sitting in his palace hall, musing on her memory, and dreaming of the past, and listening to the musicians, playing before him as he sat. So as they played, as luck would have it, they fell upon an air, which ran into his heart, and pierced it like a poisoned needle: for it was the favourite air of his vanished Queen. And as he listened, the tears came rushing into his eyes, blinding them with love-longing and the blackness of despair. And he started up, and called aloud, in a voice of thunder: Away! begone! Wretches, have ye conspired together to break my heart in two? And instantly, those unlucky players stopped affrighted, and fled before his wrath like hares. And as all shrank before him, the domestic chaplain came forward, and said politely: O King, without are waiting certain merchants,

jewellers, who have come here by appointment, to lay their jewels at thy feet.

Then the King said, with a sigh: What are all their gems to me? And yet, no matter: let them all come in.

So in came all the merchants, and showed the King each what he had. And the King went up and down, saying sadly to himself: Now every pleasure is a pain, and every joy, a grief. For what are jewels to me, now that she is no more, on whom I would have hung them till she sank beneath their weight? And then, as if in irony, he took the jewels and began to put them on himself. And taking from the merchants all they had, he hung himself all over, loading himself with gorgeous gems, with emeralds and rubies, and pearls and amethysts and diamonds, and sapphires, and every other stone, till he flashed as it were with a thousand hues, and resembled an incarnation of the spoiling of the sea.

So as he went from one merchant to another, adding to his store, he came suddenly on an old merchant, who stood a little apart

from the rest, with nothing visible to sell. And his head was of enormous size, and bare,[1] and bald on the top, and from its sides long thick white hair ran down over his shoulders, and mingled with his beard. And his face was wrinkled all over, like the skin of a withered fruit. And the King stopped and considered him, amazed at the extraordinary size of his head, which resembled a monstrous gourd. And then he said: Ha! merchant: thou art idle. Where are thy valuables, and what is thy commodity? Doubtless that must be a treasure, which thou keepest wrapped away so carefully from common eyes. But come, produce it: that I may add it to all these. Then said the merchant: All these are well enough: and yet, the thing that I have brought the King is more than all together, and yet again, less than the least. Then the King said: Of what, then, art thou a seller? And the merchant said: O King, I am a seller of dreams.

[1] *I. e.* he had no turban on. In the East, on entering a house, the head remains covered; it is the shoes which are removed.

And the King looked at him awhile, and was seized with sudden laughter. And he exclaimed: What is this, and who ever heard of a seller of dreams? Art thou mad, or art thou only an old buffoon? Then that old merchant fixed his eyes upon the King. And he said: O King, who can tell, whether he is mad or not? But as for me, know, that mine are no common dreams, but they are such as many would give all they had, and more than all they had, to dream. For I can make the past present, and I can find that which is lost, and join together whom time has parted, and turn regret to laughing joy: and I can mend the broken-hearted, and bring love's fierce emotion back, and into faded flowers of passion I can breathe again their old sweet bloom, and make to echo in living ears the music of lips that have long been dead.

And as he spoke, the King stood, and his heart rose up into his mouth. For the words of the old merchant played on it, as if it were a lute, and tugged at it like a cord; and the memory of his wife surged suddenly in his

soul, and swept it like a wind. And all at once, he seized that old man by the throat, with hands that trembled with the ecstasy of rage, and shook him like a leaf. And his voice faltered with passion, as he said: Old fool, dost thou mock me? Dost thou promise, without performing? Beware! for thou art playing with a fire that will shrivel thee like a blade of grass.

Then said the old merchant, with laughter in his wrinkled eyes: O King, thou art a child, not recognising thy physician, and seeking a quarrel with the only one who can give thee a medicine suited to thy case. For I am a physician, not of the body, but of the soul. So now, tell me: wilt thou buy from me a dream, or not? And the King looked at him for a moment; and he drew a long breath, and the tears stood in his eyes. And he said: Sell me indeed a dream, such as I wish, and thou hast described, and I tell thee this, that I will not haggle with thee over the price. Then the old man laughed softly, and he said: Mahárájj, who ever speaks of the price, before he has seen and

tried the goods? First, thou shalt have thy dream; and as to the price, we will leave it: and thou thyself shalt name it, at the end. For maybe, didst thou know the price, thou wouldst hesitate to buy at all.

Then he put his hand into his breast, and drew out a little flask. And he held that little crystal flask up in the air, looking for a ray of light. And when he could not find one, that old man muttered under his breath: Sun, sun, send me a ray. And at that very moment, there shot into the room a ray of light, right on the little flask. And then that old man said: O King, see! this is a little of the very essence of the nectar of the cold-rayed moon, where I have been this morning, to fetch it from that lord of herbs. And the King looked, and lo! there danced in that little flask a liquor that laughed and bubbled, and its deep blue was exactly the same as the colour of his dead wife's eyes. And like them, it smiled at him, changing from hue to hue, till it seemed to him that those very eyes were looking straight into his own, out of the little

flask. And quickly he put out his hand, and snatched it, and took the stopper from its mouth. And there came from it a perfume that carried to his nostrils the scent of his dead wife's hair. And his brain reeled, and he put it hastily to his lips, to drink. And as he did so, suddenly there came into his head a thought. And he paused in the very act, looking at that old merchant, out of the corner of his eye. And he said to himself: Ha! What if this old seeming merchant were an emissary of those foes of mine, whom I defeated, to give me a deadly draught? Or even so, what matter? Let me drink quickly, the more poisonous, the better. For life without her will not be worse, even when turned to death.

And then, at a single gulp, he drank the contents of the flask. And instantly, he sank back, and lay on the cushions on which he fell, buried in a magic sleep.

But as soon as he saw that the King slept, that old merchant stooped down, and squatted quickly on the floor, with his two hands grounded between his feet, and his knees

reaching to his ears. And there he remained, with closed eyes, couched in the pitcher posture like a lonely, water-watching crane, and still, as if he had been painted on the wall.

Love's Looking-Glass

Love's Looking-Glass

I

SKY-CRYSTAL

BUT the King's soul rose out of his body, like a snake escaping from its slough. And he hovered for only a single instant, over that empty shell of him, lying, loaded with priceless gems, on the floor below, and then shot up into the blue sky, like a flame parted from its wick. And as he flew like a thought through space, going like the wind he knew not where, the King said to himself: Ha! so then, I was not deceived. Certainly, that old impostor was not a merchant, but a secret agent of my foes, and now I am dead, beyond a doubt. And that delicious poison was as speedy as it was beautiful and sweet. And now I can say farewell to life without regret. And yet I should like to know, where in the world I can be going.

So as he floated in the air, bathed in unutterable peace, there came over his mounting soul a feeling of supreme disdain and loathing for his body that was lying down below. And he said to himself, as he closed his eyes: Ah! joy, for I have left behind that wretched sheath, with all its poor surroundings and its miserable mundane ties. I have emerged, as it were, from a charnel ground, and surely that divine liquor was, as that old vendor said, a very potent essence of nectar and celestial wine, mixed of the icy camphor and the oozy juices of the moon.[1] For I feel like one intoxicated, and I swim, as it were, in perfume, whose pungent and excessive sweetness almost robs me of my giddied sense; and I lie on the azure ether as if on a silken couch, poised as it were between earth and heaven, and yet I seem to soar like some earth-despising spirit-roamer in the sky.

Then after a while, he opened his eyes, and looked round, and saw himself alone in the

[1] Three things are essentially associated in Sanskrit poetry with the moon—icy cold, camphor, and the medicinal virtue of drugs.

vault of space, surrounded by the stars. And he was rushing like a comet [1] through the mansions of the moon, and he saw Chitrá, and Swáti, and Rohini and the Hunter,[2] and the rest, and far in the north, the polar star. And he looked down on the Seven Rishís,[3] and saw, far below him, the icy summits of the Snowy Mountain, with the yellow digit of the moon clinging to the peak of Kailas, like the earth of old on the horn of the holy Boar.[4]

And then suddenly, memory pierced him like a needle. And he cried out: Alas! I am still alone, and in this respect, even death has brought no change. And what then is the use of death, if it does not restore me to my wife? And what is the use of this rushing speed? For I am hurrying, against my will, into the very zenith of infinite space.

And even as he spoke, he stopped, and hung in the air like a fleck of cloud. And

[1] *Falling meteors*, says the *Brihat Sanhita*, are the *fruits of virtue enjoyed in heaven dropping in visible form.*

[2] Orion.

[3] The Great Bear.

[4] Wishnu, who in his third incarnation became a boar to support the earth: *jaya jagadisha hare!*

strange! as if the very thought had produced her, suddenly he found his wife in his arms. And as her own arms glided around his neck, and her bosom beat against his own, his hair stood on end with amazement and delight. And he heard the beating of his own heart, throbbing like thunder through the realms of space. And just as he was going to speak, she stopped his mouth by kissing him with soft lips opening into a smile, and eyes that reflected the colour of the sky. And she said: Quick, let us lose no time. Then he said: Ah! couldst thou die, leaving me without thee in that hell below? Then she said again: How can mortals disobey, when destiny decrees? It was from necessity that I left thee, and not from choice. But let us quickly make the most of a little time, granted only by the favour of the God who has the moon in his hair, and destined to end and disappear almost as soon as it has begun. Dost thou remember how we met, and saw each other first of all, away in the wood below? Come back now once more with me, and let us live and love

again, and taste the nectar of repetition, before we part to meet no more.

And instantly the King lost his senses, and lay in a dream within a dream. And as they floated in each other's arms, between the heaven and the earth, the past rose up out of the dark, before him, spread like a picture before his eyes and breathed like a tale into his ear.

II

SPRUNG FROM THE MUD

AND once again, he rode through the forest at headlong speed, and the trees flew by him like frightened shadows, while his horse ran on, and carried him swiftly whither it would, into the forest depths. And then at last, it stopped short, on the very edge of a great river, close to an aged banyan tree, whose hanging roots dropped from the branches to the ground, and with their network almost hid a little ruined shrine, whose roof their pillars pierced and split, and whose steps ran down into the stream beneath their sacred shade, where the quiet water was littered thick with lotus flowers and floating withered leaves. And there he fell from his horse's back and threw himself upon the ground: and he and his horse together slaked their intolerable thirst, with neither eyes nor ears for aught, till they had drunk their fill. And then, with a wisp of leaves and grass, he began to wipe the

foam and sweat from the quivering limbs of that noble horse, dearer to him, till that very moment, than anything else on earth.

So as he stood, wholly intent on his horse and his work, he heard behind him a little rustle, and a low cry. And he looked round. And in that instant, like a flash of lightning, he utterly forgot his horse, and himself, and everything else in the three worlds.

For there, standing a little way off, under that old root-dropping fig, was one who resembled the guardian spirit of that virgin forest's enchanted beauty, caught in the very act of changing into a feminine form, and leaving him in doubt as he gazed, whether she was a woman or a tree, or a being mixed of both. For the coarse red bark that clothed her left bare her arms and feet, which were shaped like those of Hari's darling,[1] and it cased and swathed her soft round limbs, allowing them to escape, like the calyx of a new young flower, or a rough hard husk on the very point of bursting open, by reason of the

[1] The Hindoo Aphrodite.

ripeness of the tempting fruit of womanhood, hardly to be held within. And a spray of blue convolvulus [1] hung twining all about her, trailing like a creeper from her hair, which was twisted up into a great dark knot on the very top of her pretty head, and hung there like a purple bank of thunder-cloud, out of whose shadow her great blue eyes looked round as the moon with wonder at the thing they saw before them. And her chin was very pointed, shaped like a *pippal* leaf, and over it the mind-born god had set the seal of his bow in her face, black in the twin-arch of her brow, and red in her juicy *bimbá* lips. And astonishment flushed her cheeks, like fruits, with a spot of damask blush, like bloom. And a single lotus, red as blood, nestled in the little hollow dip between the mounds of her rising breasts, upland hills where the robber Love lay lurking, to spoil the traveller of his heart. And the sweeping curve of her heavy hips stole the

[1] The *Kámalatá* is commonly described as red: this was perhaps some kind of Ipomœa, allied to the great white moon-flower of Ceylon.

eyes of the King away from her slender clasp-inviting waist, till it came to an end in the nook of her inward-bending knee. And her left hand rested gently on a pillar of the tree, while her right was stretched before her, bending back, palm upwards, with all its fingers spread, till the tip of its forefinger just touched her lower lip. And Love fished for the King's soul with her lovely wrist and arm, and took it in their net. And she was standing bolt upright, poised like a flower on her left foot's toes, with her right foot just behind it, exactly like a graceful fawn suddenly frozen into stone when running at its utmost speed by the sight of danger in its path. For she stood absolutely still, save that the lotus on her breast was lifted quickly up and down by the flutter of the maiden-wave on which it swam.

So they two stood, still as death, each thunderstruck by the other's vision, like a panther and its prey.[1] And then at last, after

[1] An "old *shikarri*" told me, that he saw on one occasion a panther stalking a goat. As soon as they saw each other, they both stood stock-still, so long, that at last the goat concluded

a time that seemed to each in spite of its length but a single instant, for each was lost in the other, standing on the threshold of Love's dream-bower where years are moments and time lies dead, she spoke, and broke the spell. And she said, softly: It is a man. Surely, thou art a man? And the King said, with a smile: O maid, what else? Then she said again: And thy companion, what is he? And the King said: He is a horse. Then she clapped her hands together, and exclaimed, as she held them joined: Ah! stand still a little longer, and let me watch both him and thee. For I have never seen before, either a horse or a man. So he stood still as she desired; and as she watched him, he watched her. And her blue eyes rested on him, and entered into his soul, and shook it so, that he began to tremble all over with the horror of extreme delight. And he said to himself: I too, I too, see a woman, for the very first time in all my life;

his panther was a mere illusion, and recommenced his dinner, browsing with unruffled mind. He would have paid dear for his simplicity, had not his crafty stalker been this time stalked himself.

which, till this very moment, has been wasted and empty and worthless, and contemptible and without a point. Ha! I am like a dark black night, that has suddenly been flooded with the rapture of a golden sun. O hail! O bright great God, in the form of that blue-eyed beautiful thing before me, that fills me with astonishment and laughter and supreme delight. And presently he said: O thou with the blue flowers in thy hair and the blue wonder in thy enormous eyes, that resemble those of a child, how can it be that in a world so full of them, thou shouldst never yet have set those eyes on either a man or a horse?

Then she started as if from a dream. And she came up close to him, and raised her hand, as though she would touch his arm: and barely touched it, with a touch like that of a leaf, which struck the King like a heavy blow. And she said, looking up at him, doubtfully: But O thou great, beautiful, deep-voiced man, how should I see either? For out of this wood I never was, and into it nothing ever comes, and in it are only its own trees, with the flowers,

and the river, and the forest beasts, and my father and myself. Then the King said: Thy father? And is not he a man? And she said: Nay, if thou art, he is not. For he is old, very old, and smaller even than myself, and his hair and beard are thin and white, and his arms and legs are rough as bark, and dry and thin as sticks. And he sits always stiff and silent, plunged in meditation, resembling the stump of an ancient tree: and it is the same as if he were not alive.[1] And if thou wilt, I will show him to thee, a little way within the wood: and yet, it were better not, for it would but distract his meditation. But thou art tall and straight and strong, and glorious, and young like me: and yet far bigger than myself! for see! how even on tiptoe I reach hardly to thy shoulder. And thy hair is like the lion's mane, and thou art like him to look at, and

[1] These ancient forest hermits, who lived alone in jungle, doing penance and eating nothing, are one of the conventions of Hindoo fairy stories. Such a one, like the mediæval saint, *a bundle of bones whose breath corrupts the world before his death*, generally has a daughter, to whose rare beauty he forms the contrast: that sharp, fierce contrast, which is the essence of the East, like life and death.

wonderful in every way, and such as I could never have believed. For often I have thought of men, and wondered what they could be like, but never dreamed of one like thee. Look only at my hand, and thine, or at my arm, or foot, and thine, and see how small and weak[1] a thing I am, compared with thee!

And the King looked at her, as she spoke; and when she ended, he began to laugh for very joy. And he said: O beautiful little blue-eyed creature, thou dost not know thy own strength, nor where it lies, but how as to thy mother? Hadst thou, indeed, a mother, or didst thou not rather grow, like a flower, out of some forest tree? Then she said: Nay, I had a mother: but alas! long ago she went away, before I can remember. For she was a heavenly Apsaras, whom Indra sent down here below, to tempt my father in this wood, and turn him from his penance.[2] And she

[1] *Abalá*, "*weak*," "*without strength*," is a common Sanskrit word for a woman, *Vas infirmius*.

[2] Indra is represented as jealous of all ascetics, lest they should reach his total of *a century of sacrifices* (*Shatakratu*). But his battle with Raghu on this head ended in a compromise (*vide Raghuwanshá*, canto iii.).

came and stayed with him awhile, and afterwards she went away, flying up to heaven, and leaving me behind her with my father in the wood. And the King said: I do not blame thy father: what wonder, indeed, if she overcame his resolution, did she resemble her future daughter, even a very little? And thy words require no other witness to their truth, except thyself. For beyond a doubt thou art the very daughter of an Apsaras. Then she said: And hast thou ever seen an Apsaras? And the King laughed, and he said: Nay, not until this moment. But come now, let me only tether my horse to yonder tree, and then, if thou wilt, we will sit and talk together. And I will be thy playfellow, and will tell thee things that thou dost not know, and thou shall tell me of nothing but thyself.

Then she said joyfully: Ah! tie him, and come quickly. And the King stood looking at her for a moment, and then he said: Sweet Blue-eyes, and art thou not afraid of me? And she looked at him enquiringly, with no shadow of suspicion, and said: Of what should

I be afraid? For art thou not a man, and which of the Creator's creatures injures its own kind? And the King gazed into her soul, through the window of her clear and smiling eyes, and again he laughed aloud for sheer delight. And he said to himself: Ha! exquisite is her intoxicating simplicity, in that she does not know, that man alone is the exception to her rule. And then he said: Sweet forest flower, what if I were tempted to pluck thee, and carry thee away with me on my horse? And yet, fear nothing: for thou art very right, and I am, of all the Creator's creatures, the one who would be most loth to do thee harm. And men were made strong by the Creator for this very reason, to guard such wonderful weak things as thee. And he said to himself: Now, let my followers only not find me till the evening, and by the favour of the Deity, I will win the trust of this bewitching maiden, and get her to come away with me. Or if not, I will stay in the wood with her for ever, becoming for her sake like one of these forest trees, rooted to the spot.

And then he took his horse, and tied him to the tree. And then they went together and sat down upon the moss-grown steps that ran down into the river: he on one, and she on another, just below.

III

PURUSHA AND PRAKRITI

AND then, for a little while, he sat in silence, looking now at the river, and now at her. But she gazed at him with great eyes that never left him for a moment, and saw nothing but himself. And suddenly he said to her: Blue-eyes, Blue-eyes, how long is it, since I met thee in the wood? Then she said: It is but a single moment. Then he said: Thou art utterly mistaken: it is more than many thousand years. And as she looked at him in wonder, he exclaimed: Ha! there it is again, and O how beautiful thou art! O thine eyes are full of wonder and my soul is full of joy. Dear child, see, yonder is the river, flowing as it has been flowing ever since it first began; and here am I, to thee the first and only man, for thou hast never seen another, and there art thou, for me the only woman, and her very type

and soul. And like the ancient Soul of Man,[1] I have been wandering about, forlorn and wretched and lonely in the dark without thee, and now at last I have found in thee my Prakriti, since thou art the very spirit of the beauty of this wood, incarnate in a woman's lovely form. And as I look at thee, laughter seems to fill my soul, for joy that I have found thee, and I feel as if, like thee, I had suddenly become a child, whereas before I was a man. And all this has come about in the moment since we met, a moment which is like a door, opening on one life, and closing on another, and it resembles the beginning and the end.

Then she said: I do not understand thee: yet speak on, without stopping: for I could look at thee and listen to thy voice, for ever. And the King said: Blue-eyes, if thou dost not understand, no matter: and possibly I am speaking at random words without a meaning, for thy great eyes deprive me of my reason,

[1] *Purusha* and *Prakriti* answer, in a sense, to our Adam and Eve: as the Germans would say, the *Ur-mensch* and *Ur-weib* of the world.

and I know not very well what I say. But now it is thy turn. And tell me, what dost thou do with thyself alone in this empty wood? Hast thou companions other than myself? Then she said: I have for companions the deer of the forest, and the parrots that live in this great tree, and the peacock that thou seest yonder on the temple wall, and the crows that come to eat the daily offering, and the flowers which I water and wear woven in my hair. And I have many things to do. For sometimes I ramble in the wood, and hunt for flowers, and watch the monkeys and the squirrels that play in the trees: and when I am tired, I sit still, playing with my hair, and rolling and unrolling it, for it is longer than I am myself and a trouble and a hindrance to me, till I knot it up thus out of the way on the top of my head, like my father's.[1] And sometimes I go and see my father, but I am afraid of him, for though his body is there, his soul is almost always absent from the body. And

[1] Ascetics wear their hair twisted in a knot, in imitation of the prince of them all, Maheshwara.

sometimes I sit by the river, when the wind is still, and watch in its mirror the clouds that float in the blue sky far below, like the swans upon its wave. And the river itself is a friend to me, for every day I bathe in it, and I often sit and wonder whence it comes and where it goes, and look to see what it carries down: and in the rainy season it changes, and grows red and angry, and murmurs and chafes, and swells till it reaches to the very foot of the tree. And sometimes when the moon is full, I hide in the hollow trees at night, and peep out at the elephants as they wander down to drink. And the King said: But do the other animals not molest thee? Then she said: Nay, for they dare not: for they all know my father well, who understands their language, and has warned them. And they fear him, lest he should curse them if they harmed me, and keep them from ever rising up into humanity, being prisoned for ever by the power of his curse in the dungeon of their creeping [1] bodies. And the King said, with

[1] When Ovid contrasted the *os sublime* of man with that of

emphasis: Aye! they who should injure thee would indeed deserve to be immured for all eternity in the lowest of all living forms. And I thank thy excellent old father for preserving thee under the shadow of his awful curse. And yet, for all this, surely thy life was lonely? Didst thou never long for a companion of thine own kind, such a playfellow, for instance, as myself?

Then she said: Though I knew it not before, yet now that thou art come, I see that I was lonely. For often I used to watch myself reflected in the water, and talk to my image, and wish that it could answer me. And sometimes in the moonlight I would play with my shadow, and wish, oh! so much, that it could come to life. And often I used to long, not knowing what I wanted; but now I am very sure that it was thou. And when I look at thee, and hear thy voice, I cannot understand how I could have lived without thee. For

the animals, he gave expression to the idea that underlies the curious Sanskrit term for the brute-creation, the *horizontal-goers* (*tiryag-jâti*).

thou art like another self, made visible in a human form: and yet thou art other, and more than that first self, which is I.

And the King gazed at her, with fire in his veins. And he said to himself: She is innocence itself, in a virgin form of matchless and incomparable beauty, and speaks without understanding the meaning of her own words. For love lies hiding, lurking in her soul, and yet she does not know it. And yet, though she does not, I know well, and only too well, now, what it is to be in love: for she burns my heart like a flame, all the more, that she is utterly unconscious of the power of her own beauty. And then he said: Blue-eyes, canst thou tell me this? Say, wouldst thou rather that I were in very truth the double of thyself, like thy image in the water, a woman, and not a man? And she answered, without hesitation: Nay, it is better as it is. And the King trembled with joy. And he said: Yet why? Then she pondered for a while, and then she said: I cannot tell. And yet I feel, that I would rather have thee different from

myself than the same; and yet I know not why. But what does it matter, why? since it is better as it is. And the King said with emotion: Sweet, thou art right. Aye! it is far better, and it does not matter why.

And as he spoke, there came a murmur, and a rushing sound in the air. And he looked up in terror, and listened, and exclaimed: Ah! what is that? Then she said: It is nothing but the sighing of the wind in the hollows of the young bamboos.

IV

BUBBLES

AND the King sighed also, with relief: for he feared that his followers had found him in the wood. And then he said: Blue-eyes, hast thou a name? Then she said: I have only the name which was my mother's. And the King said: What was that? Then she said: Long ago, when my father first saw my mother in the wood, she was standing by a bush, which had just burst into blossom all over, as if by the touch of her foot.[1] And the bees were humming and bustling eagerly all about it and her, as if they wished to kiss her, and my father saw it, and he called her by a name of his own, that has come by inheritance also to me. For my father has never called me anything else. And the King said: And

[1] There is a beautiful Indian idea, that the foot of a pretty woman will cause a particular tree (I cannot recollect which) to break into blossom.

what then was the name? And she said: Alichumbitá.[1] And the King clapped his hands, and exclaimed: Certainly, thy father is admirable, and thy name appropriate. And sure I am, that there must be more than the name of relationship between that happy bush and thee. And I am tempted to believe that thy story of an Apsaras was false, and that thou hadst for a mother no other than the very indwelling spirit of that sweetly-scented, bee-haunted bush. Then she said: Nay, my mother was an Apsaras. And the King exclaimed: How shall I believe thee? For already I am beginning to doubt whether thou ever hadst either mother or father, and wert not rather directly compounded by the Deity himself in the form of a bee, going from flower to flower, and culling thy composition out of every flower's fragrant essence and every blossom's painted bloom. And she said laughing: And what then was thy composition? And the King looked at her joyously, and said: The Deity was thy creator, and thou art mine. For I

[1] "*Kissed by the bees.*" (Note, that the third syllable rhymes, not with *crumb*, but with *room*, pronounced rather short.)

never lived until this moment, and this is all thy doing. Thou hast found me like an empty shell, and filled me with colour and emotion and the salt of beauty and the sound of laughter and the tossing to and fro of the waves of pleasure and delight. Now put me to thy ear, and I shall echo like the sea. Then she said: Once more, I do not understand. And the King said: O ocean, no matter. But thy shell must murmur, being full of thee, whether it will or no. And yet, this at least now thou dost surely understand, that I was right, and that ages have elapsed, since we met each other a little while ago in the wood. For I have utterly forgotten every fragment of my life that went before, and as I said, I have begun to live, only since I saw thy face. And thou hast discovered that thy life in the wood was very lonely till I came. And it is as though we had both been sleeping, and had just waked up. And now we are playfellows, and I will be King, and thou shall be Queen. Or hast thou never heard of kings and queens? Then she said: Nay, I have heard.

For formerly, before my father became so utterly devoted to asceticism, he used to tell me stories. And in almost every story, there was a king and queen. Then the King said: And if then I were king, wouldst thou come away with me and be my queen? And she laughed, and said: But what sort of queen should I be, that know nothing of the duties and behaviour of a queen?

Then he said: Sweet little Queen, although thou dost not know it, thy qualifications for the post of queen are such that they could not be surpassed. And the duties are easy to be learned, and the pleasures more than thou couldst dream. Only come with me, and I will show thee what they are. Or if thou wilt, I will draw thee a picture in the air, and hold it up before thee, to show thee as in a mirror thy life as a queen, and give thee a foretaste of its nectar. Hast thou never watched the bubbles on the surface of the stream? Dost thou not know how every bubble is like a little heaven, and glows for a moment with every colour of the sky, and bursts: but the

sky remains? So is it with my picture. For like a bubble, it will burst as soon as painted, being only words: but the heaven which it shows thee in its mirror shall be thine, as long as life endures.

Then she said: Draw, then, thy picture, and let me see thy heaven. And she settled herself to listen, leaning her cheek upon her hand, and looking at the King so sagely that he shook with agitation, so intense was his desire to take her in his arms. And he exclaimed: Blue eyes, come and be my Queen, and I will put thee in a palace, and build it for thee seven stories high, of ebony and sandalwood, and of silver and of gold. O come and be my Queen, and thou shalt walk on pavements more worthy of thy little feet than this rough ground, on marble of many colours, and on floors of precious stones. Only be my Queen, and I will strip thee of thy bark, and wrap thee in silky webs and tissues coloured like the rainbow, till like the moon behind a filmy cloud, thy symmetry shall borrow beauty from tell-tale veils of gossamer and envelopes of

woven gauze. Ah! come with me and be my little Queen, and I will load thy neck and arms with jewels, and thou shall play with heaps of pearl, and coral, and all the riches of the sea. Aye, shouldst thou prick thy finger, I will mend it with a ruby, and shouldst thou drop a tear, I will redeem it with a diamond, and try in vain to match, with turquoise or lapis-lazuli or opal, the colour of thine eyes. Ah! come, and slaves shall serve my dainty Queen with food on golden plates, and snow cold drinks in crystal cups, and when thou wilt, pour music in thy little ear. And elephants shall carry thee about, or thou shall ride on horses, or float on silent pools starred like the sky with a multitude of lotuses, or lie on couches softer than a flower, fanned in the heat of noon with scented leaves, or listening at midnight to the moonstones, oozing as they swing in the window's trellised frames. Ah! Blue-eyes, come and be my Queen, for I cannot do without thee, and all that I have said is nothing, for it is only the casket for thy soul. For I will be there, and serve thee all

day long upon my knees. Ah! I will take thy soul, and steep it in elixir, and drown it in the perfume and the fragrance of stories and of dreams, and dye it with the colour strained from the subtle essences of far-off lakes of passion and emotion, lying in the distant land beyond the blue horizon where the earth and heaven meet. Aye! I would turn the three worlds upside down, only to be near thee, and watch the shadow of the pleasures I would find there reflected in thine eyes, O thou naïvest and most exquisite of queens.

And she watched him as he spoke, and when he stopped, she continued to look at him in silence. And then to his amazement, she dropped her eyes, and the colour rose a very little in her cheek, that was overshadowed by her long soft lashes, and she said: Nay, thou art only laughing at me, knowing my inexperience. And as thou saidst, thy words are only bubbles, beautiful, and bursting as they jostle one another, and delusive. Nor is this the kind of queen that I would be. And the King said, with curiosity: And what then, O

maiden difficult to please, is thy conception of a queen? And she waited for a moment, and she said, keeping her eyes fixed upon the ground: Once my father told me of a queen very different from thine. And I cannot tell thee the story as he told it, for I am not a *pundit,* as is he. But he told me of a king, who was set upon by enemies and driven from his throne. And when all the world abandoned him, a single friend remained to him, and that one was his queen: who followed him in exile, and lived with him in poverty, and wandered through the world behind him like his shadow, enjoying never one of the pleasures thou hast mentioned, but sharing all his evil fortune, a pleasure infinitely greater than them all. And when he died, she would not stay behind him, but followed him through the fire, into the other world.

V

A PAINTED LADY

AND the King listened with amazement, and when she ended, he looked at her with eyes that glistened, and a heart that swelled towards her as she sat with downcast eyes, as if ashamed of her words, before him on the ground. And he struck his hands together, and exclaimed to himself: Ha! very wonderful is the way of the Creator, who teaches all his creatures the law of their behaviour, without the means of any master. For this mud-born[1] pure white lotus of a maiden has understood without assistance and as it were by native instinct, the whole duty of a faithful wife, even before she has so much as

[1] This single word, a common name in Sanskrit for the lotus, possesses an incomparable, moral and æsthetic, mingled beauty, which can only be poorly rendered in English by five words instead of one. *Mud-born* is the word: but the meaning it covers is *the pure white lotus that springs out of the thick black mire:* just as the brightest rainbow is seen against the darkest cloud.

seen a man. And then he said: Sweet little ascetic, apt pupil of a wise old father, whom thou dost resemble not only in thy hair, thou hast administered reproof to me, deservedly. And whereas I thought, in my folly, to instruct thee, it was I that received a lesson, in this matter of the way of queens. And now I see, that I spoke more truly than I knew, when I said that thou wert admirably fitted to be a queen. Now, therefore, thou art my *guru,* and I am thy disciple, and thou shalt teach me all that I do not know. Begin then, my pretty little *guru:* give me lessons, for I need them. And she laughed, and blushed, and said: Again thou art laughing at me: for how could a simple forest maiden teach anything to one, who like thyself, had lived in cities, and mixed with other men and women? And the King said quickly: Ah! dear Blue-eyes, just for that very reason is it that thou hast already taught me many things that I never knew before. For they who live in cities have their souls tainted as it were and poisoned by bad associations, whereas thine is as pure as the flowers in thy hair. And

therefore, as thou hast taught me about queens, teach me also about kings. What should he be like, whom thou wouldst be willing to follow through the world?

And she looked at him for a moment, and then she dropped her eyes, and turned away her head, and was silent. And as he watched her, the King saw the colour rising on her neck, till it reached the roots of her dark hair, like the flush of eve climbing the snowy summit of Himálaya, when day is dead. And he said to himself in ecstasy: Ha! so this pure digit of the ice-cold moon, even in the solitary darkness of the night, before the dawn of love, has dreamed of a sun which she has never seen. And O that I could dare to think myself the sunny lover corresponding to her dream, destined to touch her soul, as my question did her body, into red! But let me beware, lest I scare my timid fawn by a too abrupt approach. And then he said: Dear little blue-eyed Queen, forgive me, if I roused thy maiden shame by a rash and ill-mannered curiosity. It is enough for me to know, that the king of thy pure

fancy must be worthy of his queen: and as much above all other men, as thou art different and above all other women.

And then, with her eyes still fixed upon the ground, she began to draw upon the step with her foot. And she said softly: And in what do I differ from all other women? And the King said: Blue-eyes, ask me rather in what respect thou art the same. For thy points of difference are so many, that it would take long to tell them all. But notwithstanding, if thou wilt, I will try, and paint thy portrait for thee in contrast to the others, and hold thy image up before thee, reflected on the mirror of my soul. And she said: Try: for I desire to learn how I differ from the others. Then he said: Look, then, at me, that I may see thee before I begin. And she raised her eyes, and looked straight at him, blushing a very little, and then smiled, and looked down, and waited as he spoke.

Then the King said: Blue-eyes, every woman is a woman, and so art thou: and this is what thou hast, in common with all others of

thy sex. And yet, in every special property of woman thou hast something of thine own, which marks thee like a seal, and stamps thee as a thing distinct and peculiar, and other than them all. For others have blue eyes, but thine are bluer, and other lips are red, but thine are redder, and other brows are black, but thine is blacker, and other smiles are white, but thine, O thine is like a snowflake or the petal of a new young lotus bud. Dark, dark is hair, but thine is like the midnight, and many feet are small, but not as thine are. And O thy arms are softer and more rounded, and thy waist is more enticing, and the two proud swelling sister milky foes upon thy breast, more erect and more provoking: and yet thy step is lighter and thy walk is more bewitching and thy voice's murmur sweeter and thy laughter more delicious and thy soul fresher and more frank and thy heart it may be harder than that of any woman that I have ever seen. Moreover, all others of thy sex are tame, and thou art wild. Then she said: What is the distinction, for I do not under-

stand? And the King said: Sweet, I cannot tell thee: and yet it is a difference far greater than all the others put together. For all things that are tame are, as it were, an incarnation and embodiment of the littleness of men: but all things that are wild, as thou art, are, as it were, a portion of the Deity. For thy behaviour differs from that of other women, as does a wild vine gadding at its will from the trained flowers in a king's garden, and thy great blue eyes are utterly without hypocrisy, and resemble those of a falcon or a child. And thou thyself art like the young beautiful heifer of a wild white bull. And I know not how to tell thee what I mean, when I say that thou art wild: and yet it is just this very quality in thee which drives me to distraction. But see, now, the evening as it falls, and the water of the great river flowing with its surface unruffled by any breath of wind: see, how the cranes here and there upon the brink are mirrored in its water, and yonder pair of swans are, as it were, echoed by another pair that swim below them upside down;

and the peacock on the temple wall glitters in the last rays of the sun with emerald and blue and gold: now thou seemest, as it were, a part of it all, and as it were the soul of all this body, and like a jewel in its proper setting, and at one with all the creatures of the wood. And I begin to fear, lest thou shouldst suddenly plunge into the water, and disappear, leaving me alone.

And as he spoke, there came again a murmur and a rustle in the air. And he listened and exclaimed with anxiety: Ha! what is that? Then she said: It is only the beating of the wings of the waterfowl returning to their roost for the night.

VI

SHADOWS

And the King drew a deep breath, like a man saved from a great danger. And she saw it, and said to him: Thou art afraid. Of what art thou afraid? And the King said: Ah! dear Blue-eyes, I am indeed afraid, but of this alone, lest something should occur to cut short our conversation. And shall I not be afraid of death? For as my life began with the commencement of our converse, so its end will be my death. And like a miser, the very treasure that I worship fills me with despair, because the fear of losing it mixes with the joy of its possession, and I start at every noise. And as I said before, more than anything I fear lest thou shouldst suddenly escape into the water. And I am sorely tempted to take hold of thee, and tie thee like my horse to the tree, to prevent thee from escaping.

Then she laughed and exclaimed: There is no need: for I have no desire to escape from thee. And how could I plunge into the water, unless I were a fish? Then he said: Dear, did thy father never tell thee of the nymphs that have their homes beneath the water? Or hast thou forgotten what he said? Or is it as I said, that thou thyself art one of them, seeking to deceive me? And she said: But what should lead thee to believe it? And he said: Every reason. For they are all marvellously beautiful, as thou art, and like thee, they suddenly appear, seated by pools and streams, and lure unhappy travellers like me to ruin and destruction. Then she said: And by what means do they destroy them? And the King said: Blue-eyes, by showing themselves for but an instant, and then disappearing, never to return, carrying away with them the hearts of their miserable victims, and leaving them instead inconsolable regret, and lovelorn longing for the beauty whose momentary vision robbed them of their soul. Therefore beware! and let me warn thee, that once

having shown thyself, thou art absolutely bound to remain with me for ever: otherwise I shall be utterly undone. For if not, thou wert very wrong ever to have shown thyself at all, and deservest to be punished as a deceiver and a Thag.

Then she laughed, with laughter that was music to the King's ear. And she said, softly: But this is very hard: for how can those poor water-women help it, and is it any fault of theirs if they happen to be seen by those who happen to pass by and are not blind? Nor was it my fault, if I was seen by thee: rather was it thine, for coming into my wood upon thy horse. Then the King said: Blue-eyes, I blame thee not at all, always provided that thou dost not jump into the water, or leave me in any other way. And she said: But is it not rather I that have to be afraid, lest thou shouldst leave me? Is it my sex only that deceives, and are there no water-men, as well as water-women? And the King said eagerly: Ah! dear Blue-eyes, and would it be a grief to thee, if I should go away? And she waited

a little while, before she replied. And then she said, looking at him with playful eyes: Didst thou not say thyself that this world was full of men? And if, then, one has come into the wood to-day, another may to-morrow. And the King started, and he looked at her with rapture. And he said to himself: Ha! she is provoking me, and ah! she is delicious. Surely the very elements must have in them the nature of a woman, since even in this empty wood, this intoxicating maiden has somehow or other managed to acquire the coquetry of her sex: most of all charming there, where it was least to be expected. And then he said aloud: Dear little daughter of an Apsaras, let thine other man beware, whoever he may be: for I will set guards about the wood, like a ring, to put to death whoever they may find.

Then she looked at him a little while, and she said: See, I have told thee all I have to tell, but thou hast told me absolutely nothing. Art thou then a king, to speak of placing guards about the wood? And the King said to himself: Ha! she is clever, and has caught

me in a trap. And yet I will not tell her who I am, for if she knew, she might be dazzled by my kingdom, and fall in love with that, rather than with me. And he said: Surely, as we agreed in the beginning, if thou art a queen, I must be a king. And I will not allow any other man to tamper with my queen. And I am of good caste, and a Rajpoot, and not ashamed of my family. But what if I were in very truth a king, and banished: wouldst thou follow me through the world, as thou saidst? And she laughed and said: Nay, but I am not yet thy queen, and to follow thee is not my duty, but that of thy Queen or Queens. And the King looked at her narrowly, and said to himself: Is she speaking at random, or can it be that she is curious, or jealous, and anxious to discover whether she has a rival? And he said: Blue-eyes, King or not, this is certain, that I neither have nor will have any queen or queens whatever but thyself. Nor have I ever seen any woman in the world, till I came into this wood, that I would wish to make my wife. And therefore tell me, for as

yet thou hast not answered: if I were a king indeed, wouldst thou come away and be my Queen?

And she said: I am of good family, and not independent [1]; and it is not for myself, but for my father to dispose of me. And then, the very instant she had spoken, she uttered a sharp cry, and started to her feet, and stood. And the King leaped up in terror, exclaiming: Alas, what is the matter? For he thought she had been bitten by a snake. But he looked and saw nothing. And he drew near her, and saw that she was deadly pale, and drooping like a flower left without water in the heat of noon. And he said again, with anxiety: Alichumbitá: what is it? But she never answered, but stood silent, gazing at the river, as though he were not there.

And the King stood just beside her, looking at her with affection and alarm. And now the light was changing into darkness, for the

[1] No woman in India, even in a fairy tale, is ever independent and her own mistress, unless she belongs to a class outside the pale of moral consideration.

sun had sunk behind the western mountain, and on the trees across the river the disc of the full-moon was sitting waiting like a thief watching the lord of day away before stealing silently up into his domain. And far away down the river, a solitary star was shining in the south, below in the black water, and above in the dark blue sky, over which great bats were flapping noiselessly, like dusky ghosts coming by night to haunt the spots they loved as living birds. And the voices of the forest day had died away, and in their place the insects of the night were calling to one another to begin: and all about the shadows in the trees the fireflies were flitting in and out. And the King heard his horse whinnying and pawing on the ground, impatient at being tied so long, and fretting to be gone.

VII

TWILIGHT

AND still as she did not move, at last the King broke silence. And he said: Dear, I know not what is wrong, but I would give my life, to save thee from even a very little pain. And now the day is done, and very soon it will be night. Dost thou not hear the horse, calling, and telling me it is time to be away? And yet I cannot leave thee, if I would. And now again I ask thee, wilt thou not come away with me from this dark wood, and live and play with me for ever, as we have done to-day? For in the time that we have been together, thou hast taken absolute possession of my soul, and filled it with thyself, leaving no other room in it, so that everything except thee is utterly ousted and forgotten and obliterated. And I feel as if I had known thee, not for an hour, but for a hundred thousand years: and it cannot be but that we were King and Queen

in many births before, and destined by reason of the depth of our devotion to meet again in this one also. And I will make thy life all that I said, and more: and I will be thy father and thy mother and thy other self, reflecting thee as in a mirror, joyous when thou art joyous, and sad when thou art sad. And if thou dost regret to leave thy father and the wood, no matter: for I will bring thee back to it, as often as thou wilt. And we will make this little temple as it were a pleasure arbour, to last us till we die, and remind me for ever of the moment when I saw thy two great eyes, like two great blue lotus flowers, looking at me, out of the magic shadow of the wood.

And then all at once, she burst into a passion of tears. And she said sobbing: Now thou must go away, almost as soon as thou art come. Why didst thou come into the wood, only to destroy me? For till I saw thee, I was happy, and I took pleasure in the river, and the flowers and the trees: but now they are all become hateful in my eyes. For I cannot bear to let thee go, and be without thee:

and yet I cannot keep thee, or go with thee from the wood. And the King said, in despair: Alas! and why canst thou not come away? Then she said: As my father wishes me to marry, so I must. But thy coming took me by surprise, and robbed me of my reason: and lost in the joy of thy discovery, and watching thee, and listening to thy voice, I had utterly forgotten everything but thee; and I suddenly remembered, as I told thee of my father, all about it, and now it is a grief to me that ever I saw thee in the wood. And now all is over, and everything is changed, and thou must go away at once, and leave me to forget, if I can, that ever I have seen thee. For I cannot disobey my father, or bring discredit on my family, by having anything to do with thee: for I am intended for another. And the King exclaimed: Ah! no! it cannot be. Surely thou art raving. Or who can it be, for whom thou art preserved by thy father, as a deposit and a trust? And he said to himself: Only let me learn who it is, and I will find him, no matter who and where he is, and

rid the earth of him, and get her for myself.

Then she said: Far away in the north, on the edge of the wood, there is a King, Rudrálaka by name: and one day he will come into the wood and claim me for his bride. For so it was revealed to my father, when he enquired of my mother, long ago, to whom he should give me, when I was of age. And my mother went to Indra, and asked him; and Indra asked Maheshwara, who knows the present, the future, and the past. And how can he be deceived, or how can that which he foretold fail to come to pass? And now I see very well that it was a crime in me, ever to have had anything to do with thee: and in the madness produced by thy appearance, I have acted in a manner unworthy of my caste: for I am the promised bride of another man. And now there is nothing but for thee to go away as quickly as thou canst, and forget that ever thou didst see me in the wood.

And the King stood still behind her as she spoke, filled with amazement and relief. And he watched her weeping, with pride and de-

light; and he said to himself: Certainly she is of good family, and its very crest-jewel, and like a diamond of pure water; for she will not come away with me, but is faithful to her duty, even against her will. But once again I will test her, like gold in the fire, before I tell her who I am. But what, if she does not stand the test? Why, then I will forgive her: for how could I blame her for yielding and allowing herself to be defeated in my cause? But if she stands firm, and resists me, then I shall know that my pearl is priceless, and my emerald without a flaw.

And then he said aloud: Out upon this Rudrálaka, for he is like a cloud that has suddenly intervened, to cast a dark and horrid shadow over our sunny garden of delight, and an obstacle which only the lord of obstacles can move. And what is this Rudrálaka, to prevail over the lord of the elephant face in conjunction with the God who has flowers for his bow?[1] And cannot I persuade thee to forget,

[1] Ganesha and Káma, the gods of good luck and love; certainly two formidable antagonists.

one whom thou hast never even seen, and who is to thee nothing but a name? And who knows even whether he exists at all, and is not merely a dream of thy father's, an illusion brought into his aged head by weakness arising from severe emaciation? And wilt thou then sacrifice thy happiness and mine to a dream? And he waited for a moment, and he said: See, thou art undecided, wavering between thy duty and my love, like a flower shaken by opposing breezes. A flower thou art, and a flower shall decide for thee. And this red lotus, which has lingered so long near thy heart that it must know it, and resembles it in colour, shall be the oracle of thy destiny. And he leaned over her, and took very gently, without touching her, the lotus on her breast, and drew it away, while she offered no resistance. And he said: One petal is for thee, and one for me. Now will I pluck the petals one by one, first for thee, and second for myself. And if thine is the last, thou shalt stay, and I will go away without thee: and if mine, thou shall cast away Rudrálaka, like the stalk when

it is stripped of the leaves, and forget him, and come with me and be my wife.

And then, one by one, he began to strip the red lotus of its leaves, and let them fall upon the ground, saying as he did so: This, for thee: this, for me. And as he counted, she watched him, with tears sparkling in her eyes, till only one remained. And he held it out towards her, saying, with a smile: This, for me. And then, all at once she broke into a laugh that was mingled with sobs and sorrow and indignation. And she exclaimed: Ah! thou art cunning, and thou art very cruel. Thou knewest very well that there were but sixteen petals on the lotus,[1] and that thine must be the last. And thou art unkind, prolonging my torture, and striving, by unfairness, and temptation, to recall my resolution: yet if I did, thou wouldst only think the worse of me, even though thine would be the gain. Go, go quickly, for I may not come away with thee. And as she spoke, she turned paler than the

[1] It is one of the conventions of Hindoo poetry that the petals of the lotus are eight or sixteen in number.

Kumuda that opens in the dusk, and staggered. And she leaned against a pillar of the tree, and her eyes shone in the moonlight, and she said very quietly: Go now, take thy horse, and go away; and go very quickly: for the decision is too hard for me, and I cannot bear it very long. And it would be a stain on thee, to tempt any longer the wife of another man.

And the King gazed at her, struck with admiration and amazement. And he said to himself: Ha! where is the simple forest maiden who sat to listen at my feet, for in her place I see one whose virtue I have roused, and who orders me to go with the dignity of an insulted queen? And I stand before her like a culprit, rejoicing inwardly at the failure of my own attempt. And as he stood, lost in wonder at her moonlit unearthly beauty, and ready to fall and worship at her feet, suddenly there fell upon his ear a murmur and a rustle in the air. And he listened, and all at once the horse began to neigh; for it was the trample of horses and the thunder of their

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hoofs. And as they looked, lo! a band of horsemen issued from the wood, and came towards them; and in a moment they were surrounded by the attendants of the King.

VIII

QUINTESSENCE

And then, with a cry, Alichumbitá sprang back, and stood in dismay, on the very brink of the river, looking from the King to his followers and back again. And the King watched her with ecstasy, and he said to himself: Now could I almost forgive my attendants for this exasperating interruption. For she looks like a stag whose retreat has been cut off by the hunters, standing at bay, with every graceful limb quivering and poised on the very verge of instant action, striking terror as it were into even the hearts of her pursuers by her magnificent defiance, and cowing them by the startled pride of her haughty and yet timid eyes, and holding them as it were spellbound by the beautiful agitation incarnate in her form, and reaching its supreme expression in the deep heave of her glorious bosom. And

I can see that my followers are divided in their minds: for all their respect for me cannot prevent them from transferring their allegiance to her, and doing homage to the true deity manifest in her lovely shape. Ha! beauty is the real ruler of the three worlds, and all others are usurpers and pretenders and emptiness and show. For if I were unknown to them, my followers would pay me no regard at all: whereas they have all become slaves to my mistress, as I did myself, by a single glance at her goddess mien.

And then, as his attendants dismounted from their horses, and stood before him in attitudes of respect, the King called to his chief huntsman. And he said to him: Tell this lady who they are that stand before her. Then that huntsman said with deference: Lady, we are a very few of the devoted followers of King Rudrálaka: and having hunted for him all day long, we pray now to be forgiven, if we have succeeded at last in finding him only to be troublesome by our intrusion. And the King said: Now go, taking my

horse; and wait for me a little way off, yet not beyond a call. Then those huntsmen all retired, stealing glances as they went at the King's companion, and vanished again within the wood.

And when they were gone, the King stood awhile in silence, gazing with affection at Alichumbitá, who was lost in confusion and astonishment. And then he said: Blue-eyes, now thou hast heard. And will thou now do thy duty, and obey thy father, and justify the Great God's foresight, and come away with thy true husband and be his Queen? Or hast thou still a horror of King Rudrálaka? Ah! forgive me for trying thee, a thing which I cannot, nevertheless, regret. For thou wert proof against my bribes, and hast doubled the worth of thy wondrous beauty by exhibiting the quality of its inner soul. And she stood for a moment, changing colour, first red, and then white, as if the blood which had mantled in her face had like those huntsmen withdrawn again into the wood of her heart from modesty at the sight of him. And as he took her by

the hand, she hid her face against his breast, laughing as she wept, and raining as it were nectar with her tears into the heart of the King. So they stood together in the silence, while the King stroked her dark hair gently with his left hand. And at last he said: Sweet little Queen, thou hast seen men enough now, for one day. Know, that they are all thy servants, from the King down.

And suddenly, she raised her face, and looked at him with eyes that were full of smiles and tears and shyness and playfulness and blue colour and the tremble of the moon. And she said: Canst thou tell of what I thought, as I looked upon all those men? And he said: Of what? Then she said: They seemed to me to be worthy only to be servants to such as thee: and I saw that it was as I had thought, and that mine was a man even among men. And then she stopped, and she said again in a low voice: Now, if thou wilt, I wilt give thee an answer to that question of thine which I left unanswered. And the King said: Which? And she said: Dost thou not remember? Thou

didst ask me, what was he like whom I would follow through the world. Now canst thou guess, or shall I tell thee? And the King leaned over her, bending her a little back as she lay in his strong arms, and as she closed her eyes, he kissed her trembling lips, which shrank a little from the touch of his own. And after a while, he looked, and saw heaven reflected in the eyes of his wife beneath him, and beyond them, their two shadows, clinging together, black on the moonlit ground. And suddenly he pointed, and said to her: See, thy wish is gratified, and thy shadow has come to life. And she put both her arms round his neck, and drew him down, and kissed him again. And she said: It is not my shadow, but it is I myself that have come to life, and thou art the life that has come to me. And hadst thou gone away without me, I should not be living now: for I would have thrown myself into the river, the moment I was alone. And the King said, with a smile: Did I not tell thee, that I feared lest thou shouldst plunge into the river? And she laughed, and

said: Let me go, and see. And they looked at each other for a moment, and laughed without a reason. And they embraced each other passionately, and the King said: Give me now another kiss. So she did. And he said: Now another, and another. And so they continued, she giving and he receiving; while the night passed away.

And at last he said: Now I must carry my property away with me, for thou art no longer thy father's but mine. And we will come again, and tell thy father, but in the meantime, I will take thee, for never will I part from thee again. And she said: Do with me as thou wilt: so only that thou dost not leave me. Then he said: Blue-eyes, thou hast seen a horse to-day for the first time, and now thou shalt ride one also. And she said with a smile: But how can I ride without falling? Then he said: Fear nothing. Dost thou think that I would trust my treasure on a horse alone? But that good horse, which brought into the wood to-day a single rider, shall carry back a pair. And he has run a race to-day

that will have robbed him of his fire. Wait, now, there, for a little while, till I return: and beware! that thou dost not jump into the water. And as she smiled, they kissed each other again with insatiable lips. And then he went towards the wood, and shouted for his men. And when they came, he gave them orders, and they brought his horse, and prepared him as he said, placing for her reception soft rugs upon his back. And the King mounted, and he said: Watch me when I go, and follow me at a distance. And then he rode back to where she waited for him by the river bank.

Then he came close up to her and said: Give me now thy left hand, and place thy little foot on mine, and I will lift thee up before me. So she stretched out to him her hand, shrinking from the horse as it tossed its head and trampled the ground, and seeking with timidity for an opportunity to place her foot upon his own. So as she waited, gazing at the horse with doubtful eyes, the King laughed. And he exclaimed: This way will

not do, and now I must make another. And suddenly, he turned the horse towards her with his knee, and letting fall the reins, he leaned from the saddle and caught her in his arms, and lifted her up before him. And at that moment the horse started off, and the King felt for the reins with his left hand, holding her in his right arm, while she clung to his neck for fear of falling. And for a while the King let the horse go, for the sweetness of her terrified embrace was such that he said to himself: Ah! could this only last for ever!

Then after a while, he checked the horse, and brought him to a walk. And as they went slowly through the forest, now in the shadow and now in the moonlit glades, he let the reins fall on his horse's neck, and took his wife in both his arms, kissing her lips that kissed him again, and murmuring inarticulately words without a meaning, and filling his soul to the very brim with the intoxication of her shadowy eyes and the perfume of her hair that hung about her escaping from its

knot. And suddenly, there came as it were night over his eyes. And he felt her slipping from his embrace, which closed in vain on empty air. And before him her face wavered and flickered, and it lit up like a dying lamp for a single instant with vivid brightness, and then went out and disappeared.

IX

ECHOES AND REGRETS

And in an instant, he saw before him, no wood and no horse. But he found himself floating as at first like a cloud in the blue sky, with his wife still in his arms. And he said: Ha! how is this? I lost thee but now in the forest, and here we are together in the sky. But I seem to have but just awoken from a dream. And wert thou then with me in my dream? Then she said: Yes. And as she spoke, she caught him in a convulsive grasp, for she knew that the end was come. And as she gazed at him with agony in her eyes, he said: Ah! dost thou remember how we rode together, and lingered as I brought thee home, in that delicious wood? Dost thou remember how we laughed, and how we wept for joy? Dost thou remember how at last thou didst fall

asleep from sheer fatigue, and I carried thee sleeping home? Dost thou remember how I sat and watched thee in thy sleep, and how at thine awakening thou wast frightened, forgetting where thou wert? Dost thou remember, how everything was new to thee, and strange, and how all day long I laughed for joy to see thee, my plaything and my pretty child? Dost thou remember how we played at King and Queen, counting the whole world as a straw, and never parting, night or day? Dost thou remember how thou wast by day, the sun, and by night, the moon, of all the hours, lighting up my gloomy palace with the blaze of thy beauty and the soft light of thy love? Dost thou remember how thy voice echoed in my empty halls, and thy laughter filled up all its corners with music and delight? Dost thou remember how I used to follow thee about from room to room, and how sometimes, rogue! thou wouldst hide from me, to drive me to despair? Dost thou remember that last night, when I parted from thee to go to war, leaving my soul behind? But ah! alas! for

the day, when I rode like a whirlwind into the court, and they told me of thy death!

And as he spoke, there shot through his heart a mortal pang like a sharp sword. And at that instant, his wife vanished, and he felt himself falling, falling like a heavy stone, down through empty space. And he uttered a fearful cry, for he understood that he was returning swiftly back to earth. And struggling with vain and frenzied grief and rage, he screamed aloud, in the ecstasy of despair: Ah! my wife! my wife! Ah! not to earth! ah! not again! not without thee! not without thee!

Epilogue

The Break of a Heart

Epilogue

BUT in the meanwhile, the King's attendants sat on in the palace hall, waiting while the King slept. And he slept on, while they waited, and they watched him lying very still, on his couch upon the floor.

So as they watched and waited, the day slowly passed away. And hour succeeded hour, as the sun moved steadily on to his home behind the western hill. And all the while, the old merchant remained motionless in his place, stiller even than the sleeping King, for he never even breathed. So they watched and waited on, till for very weakness their souls were almost parting from their bodies, and slumber began to steal over their eyes. And day began to turn to twilight, and the darkness began as it were to gather and creep out of the corners of the room, in which was heard

no sound, save the deep breathing of the sleeping King.

And suddenly, like a flash of lightning, there rang through that silent room a cry, that pierced those weary watchers' ears like the point of a molten spear; for it resembled the cry of a woman, forced by the agony of abject fear into the very mouth of death. And as they bounded to their feet, and looked towards the King, there burst from his heart another cry, and yet another. And they saw his body, like a worm, writhing and quivering as it lay; and all at once he leaped from the couch and stood erect, and staggered across the floor.

And he stood there, swaying like a reed, and gazing straight before him, seeing nothing, with open eyes, that were dazed with the depth of their own despair. And every limb of his body shook, and drops of sweat stood on his brow, and his breath came hard and fast and hoarse, from a chest that heaved and trembled like the bosom of a frightened girl. So he stood, while they all watched him, silent

and aghast, and listening as it were to the beating of their own hearts.

So as they watched him, holding their breath, he began to wail like a child. And he wept aloud, with great sobs, that shook him from head to foot, till the tears rose and stood in the eyes of all that saw him, as if drawn from their sources by the sight of his own, which fell on the ground like rain. And all at once, he stopped short. And he looked up, and stared before him, with weeping and imploring eyes, that hunted as it were among them for something they could not find.

And as they watched him silently, spellbound by those troubled eyes, they saw their expression alter, and over them pass a dreadful change, till like a fire they shone with scorn and hatred and disdain. And he stepped forward, and spat at them all as they stood before him, stretching out both his arms. And as he did so, his gaze was as it were caught by the glitter of the glancing gems that hung upon his wrists. And he looked at them for a moment, and suddenly he took those jewels

and tore them from his hands and arms, and from his neck and breast. And he broke them all to pieces, snapping asunder cords and chains, and tossed all over the palace hall pearls and rubies and all the rest, till they rattled on the floor like hail. And when he had no more jewels to tear, he fell upon his clothes; and he stripped them off him with giant strength, and rent them into bits and shreds, till he stood before them breathing hard, dripping with sweat, and bleeding, as naked as he was born.

And as his eyes ran over them all as they shrank before him, they fell suddenly upon the old merchant, who sat still in the self-same place, never having stirred. So when the King saw him, suddenly he began to laugh, with laughter that was divided from sobbing by only a single hair. And he exclaimed: Ha! old vendor, art thou there, waiting for thy price? For now my dream is over, and it only remains to pay. Take for thy dream, my whole kingdom, and all that it contains. And even so, thou art unpaid: for such a

dream could not be ransomed, even by the three great worlds.

And then, with anguish in his eyes, he threw his arms to heaven. And he uttered a long low cry, like the howl of a dog whose lord is dead, and turned, and ran out of the hall.

And they stood, like pictures on a wall, while the sound of his disappearing steps died away upon their ears. And then in an instant, the hall was filled with tumult. But the King's physician rushed forward. And he exclaimed: The King's frenzy has come again, and much I fear, that it will never again depart. But as for this old merchant, who has given the King a deadly drug, let him not escape. Seize him, and let him answer for the madness of the King.

Then the guards surrounded that old merchant, but he never moved or stirred. And suddenly, seized with anger, the captain of the guards stooped down, and seized him by the beard, to drag him roughly to his feet. And lo! that old man's head came off his neck, and hung by the beard in his hand. And they

looked, and saw, that the body was hollow, and empty, and without a soul, like the trunk of a withered tree.

Then they gazed at one another, with open mouths, and eyes that were dull with fear. And after a while, the chaplain spoke. And he said slowly: Surely this was an old Rákshasa, playing with the King's life. Or who knows? For it may be, the Deity took this form, to punish the King, by means of a dream, for the sins of a former birth.



Essence

Translated



An
Essence of the Dusk

(अहिपीदितावन्दिका)

Translated from the Original Manuscript

(पुष्करेक्षणांगटा)

प्रेमादव्यरसास्वादः को हि रम्येद्रसान्तरे

Love turns venom, now I see,
Flouted Beauties vipers be

COPYRIGHT, 1906,
BY
F. W. BAIN

Dedicated

to the

Other Sex

Preface

MORE generally known, perhaps, than any other Hindoo legend, is the story of the demon, RÁHU, who brings about ECLIPSES, by devouring the Sun and Moon. For when the gods had upchurned the nectar, the delectable Butter of the Brine, Ráhu's mouth watered at the very sight of it: and "in the guise of a god" he mingled unperceived among them, to partake. But the Sun and Moon, the watchful Eyes of Night and Day, detected him, and told Wishnu, who cast at him his discus, and cut his body from his head: but not until the nectar was on the way down his throat. Hence, though the body died, the head became immortal: and ever since, a thing unique, "no body and all head," a byword among philosophers, he takes revenge on Sun and Moon, the great Taletellers, by "grip-

ping" them in his horrid jaws, and holding on, till he is tired, or can be persuaded to let go. Hence, in some parts of India, the doleful shout of the country people at eclipses: *Chor do! chor do!* [1] and hence, also, the primary and surface meaning of our title: *A Digit of the Moon in the Demon's grip:* in plain English, *an eclipse of the moon.* And yet, legend though it be, there is something in the old mythological way of putting the case, which describes the situation in eclipses far better than our arid scientific prose. I shall not easily forget, how, as we slid like ghosts at midnight, through the middle of the desert, along the Suez Canal,[2] I watched the ghastly pallor of the wan unhappy moon, as the horrible shadow crept slowly over her face, stealing away her beauty, and turning the lone and level sands that stretched away below to a weird and ashy blue, as though covering the

[1] *Let go! Let go!*

[2] Though nothing can be less romantic than a canal, gliding through that of Suez is a strange experience at night. Your great ship seems to move, swift and noiseless, through the very sand: and if only you could get there without knowing where you were, you would think that you were dreaming.

earth with a sepulchral sympathetic pall. For we caught the "griesly terror," Ráhu, at his horrid work, towards the end of May, four years ago.

But our title has yet another meaning underneath the first, for *Ahi*, the name employed for Ráhu (like all other figures in Indian mythology, he is known by many names), also means a *snake*. *Beauty persecuted by a snake* is the subject of the story. That story will presently explain itself: but the relation between *Ráhu*, or eclipses, and a snake is so curiously illustrated by a little insignificant occurrence that happened to myself, that the reader will doubtless forgive me for making him acquainted with it.

Being at Delhi, not many years ago, I seized the opportunity to visit the Kutub Minár. There was famine in the land. At every station I had passed upon the way were piled the hides of bullocks, and from the train you might see their skeletons lying, each one bleaching where it died for want of fodder, scattered here and there on the brown and burning

earth; for even every river bed was waterless, and not a single blade of green could you descry, for many hundred miles. And hence it came about, that as I gazed upon the two emaciated hacks that were to pull me from the station, a dozen miles out, and as many more back, I could bring myself to sit behind them only by the thought that thereby I should save them from a load far greater than my own, that would have been their fate on my refusal. Therefore we started, and did ultimately arrive, in the very blaze of noon.

The Kutub Minár is a needle of red stone, that rises from a plain as flat as paper to a height of two hundred and fifty feet; and you might compare it, as you catch, approaching, glimpses of it at a distance, to a colossal chimney, a Pharos, or an Efreet of the Jinn. The last would be the best. For nothing on the surface of the earth can parallel the scene of desolation which unrolls itself below, if you climb its 380 steps and look out from the dizzy verge: a thing that will test both the muscle of your knees and the steadiness of your

nerves. Round you is empty space: look down, the pillar bends and totters, and you seem to rock in air; you shudder, you are falling: and away, away below, far as the eye can carry, you see the dusty plain, studded with a thousand tombs and relics of forgotten kings. There is the grim old fortress of the Toghlaks: there is the singular observatory of the rájá astronomer, Jaya Singh: and there the tomb, Humaioon's tomb, before which Hodson, Hodson the brave, Hodson the slandered, Hodson the unforgotten, sat, for two long hours, still, as if man and horse were carved in stone, with the hostile crowd that loathed and feared him tossing and seething and surging round him, waiting for the last Mogul to come out and be led away. The air is thick, and sparkles with blinding dust and glare, and the wind whistles in your ears. Over the bones of dynasties, the hot wind wails and sobs and moans. Aye! if a man seeks for melancholy, I will tell him where to find it—at the top of the old Kutub Minár.

And then, that happened which I had fore-

seen. We had not gone a mile upon our homeward way, when one of the horses fell. Therefore, disregarding the asseverations of my rascally Jehu that the remaining animal was fully equal to the task alone, I descended, and proceeded on foot. But a ten-mile walk on the Delhi plain in the hottest part of the day is not a thing to be recommended. After plodding on for about two hours, I was, like Langland, "wery forwandred," and went me to rest, not alas! by a burnside, but in the shadow of one of the innumerable little tombs that stand along the dusty road. There I lay down and fell asleep.

Nothing induces slumber like exertion under an Indian sun. When I awoke, that sun was setting. A little way before me, the yellow walls of Delhi were bathed in a ruddy glow; the minarets of the Great Mosque stood out sharp against the clear unspotted amber sky. And as I watched them, I suddenly became aware that I was myself observed with interest by a dusky individual, who was squatted just in front of me, and who rose,

salaaming, when he saw that I was awake. It appeared that I had, so to say, fallen into a "nest of vipers"; that I had unwittingly invaded the premises of a snake dealer, who, no doubt for solid reasons, had made my friendly tomb the temporary repository of his stock-in-trade.

The Indian snake charmer, *gáruda, hawadiga,*[1] or whatever else they call him, is as a rule but a poor impostor. He goes about with one fangless cobra, one rock snake, and one miserable mongoose, strangling at the end of a string. My dweller in tombs was richer than all his tribe in his snakes, and in his eyes. I have never seen anybody else with real cat's eyes: eyes with exactly that greenish yellow luminous glare which you see when you look at a cat in the dark. They gleamed and rolled in the evening sun, over a row of shining teeth, as their owner squatted down before me, liberating one after another from little bags and baskets an amazing multitude of snakes, which he fetched in batches from the interior of the

[1] *Hâwa*, in Canarese, is the name of Ráhu.

tomb, till the very ground seemed alive with them.[1] Some of them he handled only with the greatest respect, and by means of an iron prong. Outside the Zoo (where they lose in effect) I never saw so many together before: and it is only when you see a number of these reptiles together that you realise what a strange uncanny being, after all, is a snake: and as you watch him, lying, as it were, in wait, beautiful exceedingly, but with a beauty that inspires you with a shudder, his eyes full of cruelty and original sin, and his tongue of calumny and malice, you begin to understand his influence in all religions. I was wholly absorbed in their snaky evolutions, and buried in mythological reminiscences, when my *gáruda* roused me suddenly, by saying: *Huzoor,* look!

He leaned over, and administered with his bare hand a vicious dig to a magnificent hamadryad that lay coiled upon itself in its open basket. The creature instantly sat up,

[1] I did not count them, but there were several dozen, nearly all different. I have reason to believe that this man must have been one of the disciples of a former very celebrated snake charmer, who was known all over India.

with a surge of splendid passion, hissing, bowing, and expanding angrily its great tawny hood. The *gáruda* put his *púngí* to his lips, and blew for a while upon it a low and wheezy drone,—the invariable prelude to a little *jadoo,* or black art,— which the beautiful animal appeared to appreciate: and then, pointing with the end of his pipe to the "spectacles" on its hood, he said, with that silky, insinuating smile which is characteristic of the scamp: *Huzoor, dekho, namas karta*[1]:—

Nágki phani, chánd ka dúkh
Uski badi, áp ka súkh.[2]

I did not understand his lunar allusion, but, judging that his rhyming gibberish, like that of the rascally priests in Apuleius, was a carefully prepared oracle of general application, kept in stock for the cozening of such prey as myself, I repeated to him my favourite Hindu proverb,[3] and gave him in exchange for his

[1] *See, he makes obeisance.*

[2] Which we may roughly render: *Hood of snake brings joy and rue, this to moon and that to you.* In all Oriental saws jingle counts for much.

[3] "*Tulsi, in this world hobnob with everybody: for you never know in what guise the deity may present himself.*" In the original it is a rhyming stanza.

benevolent cheque on the future, a more commonplace article of present value, which led to our parting on the most amicable terms. But I did him injustice, perhaps. Long afterwards, having occasion to consult an astronomical chart, with reference to this very story, all at once I started, and in an instant, the golden evening, the walls of Delhi, and my friend of the many snakes and sinister eyes, suddenly rose up again into my mind. For there, staring at me out of the chart, was the mark on the cobra's head. It is the sign still used in modern astronomy for "the head and tail of the dragon," the nodes indicating the point of occultation, the symbol of eclipse.

What then induced or inspired the *gáruda* to connect me with the moon? Was it really black art, divination, or was it only a coincidence? Reason recommends the latter alternative: and yet, the contrary persuasion is not without its charm. Who knows? It may be that the soul grows to its atmosphere as well as the body, and living in a land where dreams are realities, and all things are credi-

ble, and history is only a fairy tale—the land of the moon and the lotus and the snake, old gods and old ruins, former births, second sight, and idealism—it falls back, unconsciously mesmerised, under the spell of forgotten creeds.

POONA, April, 1906.

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A Haunted Beauty

A Haunted Beauty

May that triumphant Lord protect us, who as he stands in mysterious meditation, bathed in twilight, motionless, and ashy pale,[1] *with the crystal moon in his yellow hair, appears to the host of worshippers on his left, a woman, and to those on his right, a man.*

I

THERE lived of old, on the edge of the desert, a rájá of the race of the sun. And like that sun reflected at midday in the glassy depths of the Mánasa lake, he had an image of himself in the form of a son,[2] who exactly resembled him in every particular, except age. And he gave him the name of Aja, for he said: He is not another, but my very self that has

[1] Being actually smeared with ashes. The god is of course Shiwa, and the allusion is to his *Ardhanári*, or half male, half female form.

[2] This punning assonance is precisely in the vein of the original.

conquered death, and passed without birth straight over into another body. Moreover, he will resemble his ancestor, and the god after whom I have called him Aja.[1] So as this son grew up, his father's delight in him grew greater also. For he was tall as a *shála* tree, and very strong, and yet like another God of Love: for his face was more beautiful than the face of any woman, with large eyes like lapis-lazuli, and lips like laughter incarnate: so that his father, as often as he looked at him, said to himself: Surely the Creator has made a mistake, and mixed up his male and female ingredients, and made him half and half. For if only he had had a twin sister, it would have been difficult to tell with certainty which was which.

And then, when Aja was eighteen, his father died. And immediately, his relations conspired against him, led by his maternal uncle. And they laid a plot, and seized him

[1] This name (pronounce Aj- to rhyme with *trudge*), meaning both *unborn* and *a goat*, is a name of the sun (who was a goat in Assyria), the soul, Brahma, Wishnu, Shiwa, the God of Love, and others. It was also the name of Rama's grandfather.

at night, and bound him when he was asleep: for they dared not attack him when he was awake, for fear of his courage and his prodigious strength. And they deliberated over him, as he lay bound, what they should do with him: and some of them were for putting him to death, then and there. But the prime minister, who was in the plot, persuaded them to let him live, saying to himself: In this way I shall make for myself a loophole of escape, in case he should ever regain his throne.

Then in the early morning, his uncle and his other relations took him away, and laid him bound on a swift camel. And mounting others, they hurried him away into the desert, going at full speed for hours, till they reached its very heart. And there they set him down. And they placed beside him a little water in a small skin, and a little bag of corn. And his uncle said: Now, O nephew, we will leave thee, alone with thy shadow and thy life in the sand. And if thou canst save thyself by going away to the western quarter, lo! it is open before thee. But beware of attempting to return home, towards the rising sun. For I will

set guards to watch thy coming, and I will not spare thee a second time.

And then, he set his left arm free, and laid beside him a little knife. And they mounted their camels, and taking his, they flew away from him over the sand, like the shadow of a cloud driven by the western wind.

So when they were gone, Aja took the knife, and cut his bonds. And he stood up, and watched them going, till they became specks on the edge of the desert and vanished out of his sight.

II

THEN he looked round to the eight quarters of the world, and he looked up into the sky. And he said to himself: There is my ancestor, alone above, and I am alone, below. And he put his two hands to his breast, and flung them out into the air. And he exclaimed: *Bho!* ye guardians of the world,[1] ye are my witnesses. Thus do I fling away the past, and now the whole wide world is mine, and ye are my protectors. And I have escaped death by a miracle, and the craft of that old villain of a prime minister, whom I will one day punish as he deserves. And now it is as though I knew, for the very first time in all my life, what it was to be alive. Ha! I live and breathe, and there before me is food and water. And now we will see which is

[1] The *Lokapálas*, or regents of the world, often thus appealed to, are eight: Kubera, Isha, Indra, Agni, Yama, Niruti, Waruna, and Wayu: and they ride on a horse, a bull, an elephant, a ram, a buffalo, a man, a "crocodile," and a stag.

the stronger: Death in the form of this lonely desert, or the life that laughs at his menace as it dances in my veins. And little I care for the loss of my kingdom, now that my father is dead and gone. I throw it away like a blade of grass, and so far from lamenting, I feel rather as if I had been born again. Ha! it is good to be alive, even in this waste of sand. And he shouted aloud, and called out to the sun above him: Come, old Grandfather, thou and I will travel together across the sand. And yet, no. Thou art too rapid and too fierce to be a safe companion, even for one of thine own race. So thou shalt go before me, as is due to thee, and I will follow after.

And then, he lay down on the sand, covering his head with his upper garment, and slept and waited all day long, till the sun was going down. And then he rose, and ate and drank a very little, and taking with him his skin and corn, he walked on after the sun, which sank to his rest in the western mountain. But Aja followed him all night long, with the moon for his only companion. And as he went, he saw

the bones of men and camels, lying along the sand, and grinning at him as it were with white and silent laughter, as though to say: Anticipate thy fate: for but a little further on, and thou shalt be what we are now. But he went on with nimble feet, like one that hurries through the den of a sleeping hungry lion, till the sun rose at last behind him. And then again he lay down, and rested all day long, and started again at night. And so he proceeded for many days till all his water and corn were gone. And as he threw away the skin, he set his teeth, and said: No matter. I will reach the end of this hideous sand, which, like the dress of Draupadi,[1] seems to roll itself out as I go across it, though I should have to go walking on long after I am dead.

And night after night he went on, growing every night a little weaker. And then at last there came a night when as he toiled along with heavy steps that flagged as it were with loaded feet, faint with hunger and burning

[1] When she was lost in the gambling match, and Duhshásana tried to strip her, as he pulled off one dress, another appeared below it, refusing to leave her naked.

thirst, he said to himself: I am nearly spent, and now the end is coming near, either of the sand, or of me. And then the sun rose behind him, and he looked up, and lo! it was reflected from the wall of a city before him, which resembled another sun of hope rising in the west to cheer him. And he rubbed his eyes, and looked again, saying to himself: Is it a delusion of the desert, to mock me as I perish, or is it really a true city? And he said again: Ha! it is a real city. And his ebbing strength came back to him with a flood of joy. And he stopped, and took up a little sand, and turned, and threw it back, exclaiming: Out upon thee, abode of death![1] Now, then, I have beaten thee, and thy victim will after all escape. And he hurried on towards the city, half afraid to take his eyes away from it for a single instant, lest it should disappear.

So as he drew near it, he saw a crowd upon its wall. And when he was distant from it but a little way, suddenly its great gate's mouth was thrown open, and a stream of peo-

[1] Still the name of Marwar.

ple shot from it like a long tongue, and rapidly came towards him, so that he said to himself: Ha! then, as it seems, I am expected by the citizens of this delightful city, who are as eager to come to me as I am to get to them. And they came closer, clamouring and buzzing as it were like bees; and he looked, and lo! they were all women, and there was not a man among them all. And as he wondered, they ran up, and reached him, and threw themselves upon him like a wave of the sea, laughing and crying, and drowning him in their embraces: and they took him as it were captive, and swept him away towards the city, all talking at once, and deafening him with their joyful exclamations, paying not the least attention to anything that he tried to say. And Aja let himself go, carried away by all those women like a leaf in a rushing stream. And he said to himself, in astonishment: What is this great wonder? For all these women fight for me, as if they had never seen a man in their lives before. Where then can the men be, to whom they must belong? Or can it be that I have

come to a city composed of women without a man? Have I escaped the desert only to be drowned in a sea of women? For what is the use of a single man in an ocean of the other sex? Or are they dragging me away to offer me up to the Mother,[1] having sacrificed all their own husbands already? Or have I really died in the desert, and is all this only a dream of the other world? Can these be the heavenly Apsarases, come in a body to fetch me away, as if I had fallen in battle? Surely they are, for some of them are sufficiently beautiful even for Indra's hall. And anyhow, it is better to be torn to pieces by beautiful women, even if there are far too many, than to die in the desert, all alone.

So as they bore him along, chattering on like jays and cranes, he said again to the women next him: Fair ones, who are you, and where are you taking me, and why in the world are you so greatly delighted to see me? And then at last, they replied: O handsome stran-

[1] Durgá or Párwatí.

ger, ask nothing: very soon thou shalt know all, for we are carrying thee away to our King. And Aja said to himself: Ha! So, then, there is a King. These women have, after all, a King. Truly, I am fain to see him, this singular King of a female city. And weak as he was, he began to laugh, as they all were laughing: and so they all surged on like a very sea of laughter, through the gates of the city, and along the streets within, till they came at last to the King's palace. And all the way, Aja looked, and there was not to be seen so much as the shadow of a man in all the streets, which overflowed with women like the channel of a river in the rainy season.

Then the guards of the palace doors, who were also women, took him, and led him in; and all the women who had brought him crowded in behind. And they mounted stairs, and after a while, they entered at last a great hall, whose pillars of alabaster were reflected in its dark green crystal floor, giving it the semblance of a silent pool in which a multitude of colossal swans had buried their necks

beneath the water. And there Aja found himself in the presence of the King.

And instantly, all the women screamed together: Victory to thee, Maharájá! for here have we brought thee another husband for thy lovely daughter. And Aja started. And he said to himself: Another husband! How many husbands, then, has this strange King's daughter got already? Has she an insatiable thirst for husbands, whose number I am brought to swell? So as he stood reflecting, the King leaped from his throne, and came towards him. And as Aja looked at him, he was seized with amazement greater than before. For the King resembled a very incarnation of the essence of grief, yet such that it was difficult to behold him without laughter, as if the Creator had made him to exhibit skill in combining the two. For his long thin hair was pure white, as if with sorrow, and his eyes were red, as if with weeping, and great hollow ruts were furrowed in his sunk and withered cheeks, as if the tears had worn themselves channels in which to run. And though

he was tall, he was bent and old, as if bowed down by a load of care. And he tried, as if in vain, to smile, as he said in a mournful voice that quavered and cracked: O man, whoever thou art, long have I waited for thee, and glad indeed I am to see thee, and inclined to dance like a peacock at the sight of a rainy cloud.

And as he gazed upon the King, Aja was seized with sudden laughter that would not be controlled, saying within himself: Much in common they have between them, a dancing happy peacock, and this doleful specimen of a weeping King! And he laughed till tears ran down his cheeks also, as if in imitation of those of the King. And when at last he could speak, he said: O King, forgive me. For I am very weak, and have come within a little of dying in the desert. And I laughed from sheer exhaustion, and for joy to see in thy person as it were the warrant of my escape from death. Give me food, and above all, water, if thou wouldst not have me die at thy feet. And afterwards, show me, if thou wilt, thy daughter, to whom, as it seems, I am to be married

whether I will or no. And the King said: O thou model of the Creator's cunning in the making of man, thy hilarity is excused. Food thou shalt have, and water, and everything else thou canst require, and that immediately. But as for my daughter, there she is before thee. And she could teach dancing even to Tumburu himself.[1]

[1] A Ghandarwa, or heavenly musician, and the dancing master of the Apsarases. [Pronounce tum- to rhyme with *room*, rather short.]

III

And then, as the laughter surged again in Aja's soul, saying within himself: Out on this pitiable old scarecrow of a King, whose only thought is dancing! the King turned, and stood aside. And Aja looked, and instantly, the laughter died out of his heart, which ceased as it were to beat. And he murmured to himself: Ha! this is the most wonderful thing of all. King and women and desert and all vanished out of his mind, as if the sentiment that suddenly seized it filled it so completely as to leave room for nothing else. And he stood still gazing, feeling as though he were spinning round, though he was standing still as death. For there before him stood this enigmatical King's daughter. And like her father, she also seemed an incarnation of the soul of grief, not as in his case ignominious and an object of derision, but rather resembling a

heavenly drug compounded of the camphor of the cold and midnight moon, that had put on a fragrant form of feminine and fairy beauty to drive the world to sheer distraction, half with love and half with woe. For like the silvery vision of the new-born streak of that Lord of Herbs, she was slender and pale and wan, formed as it seemed of some new strange essence of pure clear ice and new dropt snow, and she loomed on the soul of Aja out of the blackness of his trance like a large white drooping lily, just seen in the gloom of an inky night. And her hair and brow were the colour of a thunder-cloud in the month of Chaitra,[1] and like that cloud, the heavy sorrow hung in her great dark mournful eyes, drenching him as it were with a shower of dusky dreamy dewy beauty, and drawing him down bewitched and lost like the victim of a haunted pool into the snaky eddy of their silent unfathomable recess. And yet her deep red lips trembled, as it were on the very border of a smile, as if they were hinting against their will of a mine

[1] April.

of laughter and subtle snares that they were not allowed to use. And she had risen up to come and meet him, yet was hanging back as if reluctant, and so she stood, all reflected in the polished floor, with her head thrown back to look at him, for she was very small, like one on the very point of imploring help, yet shrinking, as if too proud to ask it from a stranger, balanced as it were between reliance on her own pure and pleading beauty and doubtfulness of its reception. So she halted irresolute, with glorious throat that was hovering still over the swell of her lifted breasts, poised as it were on the very verge of tumultuous oscillation, like that of Rati, preparing with timidity to cast herself at the feet of the three-eyed God, to beg back the body of her burned-up husband in a passion of love-lorn tears.

And Aja stood before her, like the sea when the digit of the moon rises suddenly over its waves, stirred with a tumult of strange emotions, and yet lit by a heavenly ray, a mass of agitated darkness mixed with dancing, trem-

bling light; all unaware that he was himself to the King's daughter exactly what she was to him, a weapon of bewilderment in the hands of the cunning god of the flowery bow, who shot him suddenly at her, like an arrow of intoxication, and pierced her through the very middle of the soft lotus of her heart.

So they two stood awhile in silence. And all at once, Aja spoke, not knowing that he spoke aloud. And he said, very slowly: How many husbands, then, have already had this lustrous beauty, who looks for all as pure and pale and undefiled as a new young delicate jasmine bud? And instantly, as if roused from sleep by his reproach, he saw the colour leap up into her cheek, and spread like dawn flushing over her burning throat and brow. And she drew a sudden breath, and her bosom heaved abruptly as if with a sob of shame. And at that moment, the voice of the King her father broke harshly into Aja's dream, saying: Alas! alas! Never a husband has had her yet, though she is now long past sixteen, and could even teach Tumburu dancing.

And then, as if the King's words had suddenly lifted a weight from his soul, Aja burst into a shout of laughter. And he tottered, as if to fall. And he caught at the old King's arm, and gripped it so that he almost screamed, exclaiming amid his laughter: Ha! King, I am also the son of a King: and now I will be thy son-in-law. And she shall have a husband at last, and teach him, if she pleases, dances that even Tumburu does not know. And with that, he fell into such a paroxysm of laughter, that weak as he was, he could not stand, but fell: and his laughing turned to sobbing. Then the King's daughter turned to her father, with an angry flush on her brow. And she said, with strong emotion: O father, wilt thou delay for ever to send for food and water? Dost thou not see that this King's son, great and powerful though he be, is weak, and it may be, perishing, before thy face, of hunger and thirst, having escaped by a miracle out of the desert to die by thy neglect?

And she clapped her hands, stamping her foot in indignation. Then the women ran,

and took up Aja, and carried him away. And they bathed him, and tended him, and fed him till he was recovered: and after a while, they brought him back, into the presence of the King.

IV

So he came once more into that hall, looking like another man. And he seemed in the eyes of the King like the rising sun of his daughter's marriage, but in those of his daughter like the very God of Love, newly risen from his own ashes. And he said joyously: O King, now I am again myself: and my reason and my strength have both again returned to me. And if in their absence, I behaved strangely and without good manners, it behoves thee to lay the blame rather on the desert of sand that surrounds thy city, than on myself. For I was like one delirious, and half distracted by wonder and other feelings coming to the aid of hunger and thirst. Then he told the King his name and family, and all his story, looking all the while at the King's daughter, as she did all the while at him, with glances that resembled sighs. But as he

watched her, Aja said to himself in wonder: What has happened to her, since I saw her first, and what is the matter with her, now? For her quiet grief has abandoned her, and she looks like one in a burning fever; and two red spots, like suns, burn and blaze upon her cheeks, and her great eyes shine and glow, as if there were a fire within her soul. So when he had finished his own tale, he said: Now, then, O King, I have told thee all that I have to tell. And now it is thy turn to speak. Explain to me all this wonder; for I seem to move in a maze of extraordinary events. Why are there, in thy city, no men, but only women? And what is the cause of thy grief? And, greatest wonder of all, how comes it that thou hast found a difficulty in finding a husband for this thy daughter? For, as for myself, know that, make any terms thou wilt, I am ready to marry her, blindfold, on any conditions whatever: nay, would she only be my wife, I should consider the fruit of my birth attained.

And then, to his amazement, that strange

old King began to weep once more. And tears flowed down his cheeks like rain, as he said: Alas! alas! O son-in-law that would be, so fine a man art thou, that I am distressed indeed to see thee, and to hear thee so eagerly proposing to take my daughter for thy wife. For all that have preceded thee, and they were many hundreds, have said the very same: and yet all without exception have come to a miserable end: and there she is, unmarried still.[1] And yet this is no fault of hers, unless indeed it be a fault to be beautiful beyond compare. Nor has her maiden purity been sullied in the least degree by ever a suitor of them all. But all this has come about by reason of a fault of mine, itself, beyond a doubt, the bitter fruit of the tree of crimes committed in a former birth. For know that long ago, when I was young, I conquered the entire earth, and brought it all, from sea to sea, under the shadow of one umbrella. So when I was re-

[1] It may not be superfluous to remind the English reader that, according to Hindoo ideas, there is no disgrace like that of possessing an unmarried daughter. Hence the practice, among the Rajpoots and adjacent peoples, of destroying the female infants, to avoid it.

posing, after my exertions, one day there came to see me Nárada and another *rishi*. And Nárada entered first. And when he complimented me, as the chosen husband of the earth, I said to myself: Now, I must make him some suitable return. And accordingly, I presented him with the whole earth. Then he replied: O King, what is the use of the earth to me? And he gave it back to me, with his blessing, saying: Obtain an incomparably beautiful offspring![1] and so he went away. And then the other great *rishi* entered, and congratulated me also. And I presented him also with the entire earth. Then that *rishi* looked at me with eyes that were red with anger. And he said slowly: What! Is my merit utterly despised? Dost thou presume to offer me only the leavings of another? Thou shalt indeed obtain offspring, but only of the female sex. And beautiful it shall be indeed: but little shall that beauty profit either thyself

[1] Intending, of course, a son. Unfortunately he employed a word of indeterminate gender: hence the lamentable *dénouement*. For in ancient India, as in ancient Rome, the *spoken word*, the letter, determined everything.

or her. So having uttered his curse,[1] he laughed, and instantly went away, refusing to be propitiated or to throw any light upon the future. And thereafter in due time there was born to me, not the nectar of a son, but this lump of grief in the form of a daughter. And as if her sex were not enough,[2] her almost inconceivable beauty and accomplishments have only added to my calamity: nay, they are the very root of it, and the essence of its sting. For all has come to pass, exactly as that testy old *rishi* said. For though she is, as thou seest, beautiful as the moon, and like it, full of arts,[3] and above all, a dancer that would turn even Tumburu green with envy, all this nectar has become poison by the curse of that old

[1] Nothing in Hindoo mythology is more absurd than the implacable fury of the most holy men for the most trifling slights, unless it be the accuracy with which their most dreadful imprecations are literally fulfilled. This was, I believe, characteristic also of the saints of Erin.

[2] An English lady having called, not long ago, at the house of a Hindoo lady, to enquire how she was, after an interesting event, and *what was the result*, received for answer: Alas, *memsahib, nothing at all:* a girl. Had she been a partisan of "woman's rights," she would probably never have recovered from the shock.

[3] A play on words, not transferable to English.

ascetic, and the very perfection of her beauty has become the means of undoing us both. For about two years ago, as we were walking together at midnight, on the terrace of the palace, that forms the edge of the city wall, enjoying the cold camphor of the moon after the heat of a burning day, suddenly, out of the desert, we heard as it were the rush of wings. And as we stood and listened, there arose in the air a sound of voices, like those of a man and woman in vehement dispute. But though we could distinguish the tones, we could not understand the meaning, for the language was unknown to us. And then, after a while, those two invisible air-goers appeared all at once before our eyes, seated on the battlements, in the form of a pair of vultures.[1] And immediately, the male vulture spoke with a human voice, saying: O King, give me now this daughter of thine to wife. And instantly I answered rashly: Never will I bestow my daughter on a bird of ill-omen such as thou art. Thereupon that evil-minded suitor

[1] It is a very bad omen, in India, for a vulture to settle on a house.

laughed like a hyæna: and instantly my daughter fell into a swoon. And as she lay in the moonlight, she looked so indescribably and unutterably beautiful that even that loathsome bird was moved. And he said to his companion: Daughter, I was right, and thou wert wrong. Look, and see, and allow, that she is far more beautiful than even thou art. Thereupon that *gridhri*[1] laughed also, and she said: Time shall show. Listen, King. This is Kírttisena, a nephew of Wásuki, King of the Snakes, and I am his only daughter. For this form of vulture was assumed by us, only to converse with thee. Now he maintained thy daughter to be more beautiful than I am. Thereupon I vowed vengeance. But I agreed to leave her unmolested, if thou didst give her to him for a wife. So to preserve her from my vengeance, he asked her of thee in marriage. Now, then, since thou hast rejected his suit, despising him hastily for his outward form, and since my own beauty has been slighted by his comparison, ye two shall

[1] A female vulture. I retain the original word, because it seems to be peculiarly expressive of the thing.

be punished, she for her beauty, and thou for thine insolence, and through the means of that very beauty, on account of which my father and I have become contemptible. See, O thou who despisest a suitor, whether thou canst easily procure another. This shall be the condition of thy daughter's marriage. Whatever suitor shall lay claim to her, thou shalt send up to this terrace alone at night. And if he claims, and does not come, we will swallow thy city whole, houses and all. Then those two vultures disappeared. And not long afterwards, hearing that my daughter was to be given in marriage, suitors arrived like swarms of bees from every quarter of the world, attracted by her fame. For she is called Yashowatí, because the fame of her fills the world. Then all those suitors followed one another, like the days of the year in which they went, up upon the terrace of the city wall: and like those days, not one of them all has ever returned, but they have vanished utterly, none knows how, or where. And when all the distant suitors were exhausted,

and all the neighbouring kings, then, in my ardent desire to get her married, no matter how, to no matter whom, I offered her to the men of my own city, showing her to them from the palace windows. And every man that saw her ran to win her; and one by one, the men of the city followed after her former suitors, till they grew few in the city. Thereupon the women banded together, and took their husbands and their sons and everything in the shape of a man, and hid them: and now as thou seest, there is not a man to be seen or found, in the whole city. But every stranger that comes to the city, they catch, and bring him straight to me, as they have done in thy case also. And the mere sight of my daughter always makes him not only willing, but, as thou art, even eager, to marry her at any cost. And yet they have all utterly vanished, like stones dropped, one after another, into a well without a floor. And there is my daughter, maiden and unmarried still. And I can see my ancestors wringing their hands for grief: knowing well that as soon as I myself

am dead, it is all over with their race. For who will offer them water, since the fatal beauty of my only daughter has set a term to my ancient line?

So as Aja stood, lost in wonder at the old King's story, his daughter suddenly rose to her feet with a shrill cry. And she exclaimed: O son of a King, fly quickly! Hence! away! back with thee even into the desert, and leave me and my father and this miserable city to our inevitable fate. And she sank down in a swoon, and would have fallen to the ground, but that Aja sprang quickly forward and caught her as she fell.

So as he stood, holding her in his arms, and wishing that her swoon might last for ever, so only that he held her, for she stole away his senses with the seduction of her fragrance and proximity, her father exclaimed, in dismay: Ha! this is something new, and a thing that has never occurred before. And what can be the matter now? O son of a King! she must have fallen in love with thee, as well indeed she might, for thy beauty and thy youth. And

doubtless it has grieved her soul, to think of thy approaching end. But alas! alas! this is worse than all. For now, if thou fallest a victim, as cannot fail to be the case, like all thy predecessors, she will herself not survive thee: and then, indeed, there is an end of all. For as long as she was left to be married, there was still a shadow of hope behind.

And he began to ramble about, wringing his hands for grief. But Aja said to himself, with joy: Ha! this was all I wanted, if only it be true. And he said to the King: O King, it will be time enough to afflict thyself for her death or for mine when we have actually died. But count me, in the meantime, as thy son-in-law: and be under no anxiety as to the fate of thy ancestors. For I will guarantee their good condition: and this very night, I will rid thee of the evil demon that molests her. And to-morrow, I will take this hand, and lead her round the fire.[1]

And he took her hand, as she lay in his arms, and touched it with his lips.

[1] That is, marry her.

V

And instantly, as though his kiss had been to her like sandal and like palm-leaf fans, she came back to herself. And when she saw who held her, she started up, and stood, blushing the colour of her own lips, with eyes cast upon the ground. And the King said: O daughter, what is this? Does it become a high caste maiden outwardly to exhibit her inward feelings, and abandon the straight line of virgin modesty by behaviour that betrays her heart?

And then, Yashowatí sighed deeply. And she looked for a while in silence, first at her father, and then at Aja: and all at once, she stood erect, like one seized by sudden resolution, and she clapped her hands together, and exclaimed, in a voice that shook and quivered with emotion: Ha! who can hide a forest fire by covering it over with a little straw, or what does maiden conduct matter, in the ruin of the

three worlds! Aye! the fire of grief consumed me, to see this noble son of a king, and to think that he escaped the desert only to meet his death from me. Now has my punishment come upon me in the form of this tall and splendid youth. For I grieved for the fate of my former suitors, and yet I saw them for all that go, one by one, to their useless doom, and still myself remained alive. Long ago, beyond a doubt, I ought myself to have left the body, and perished of my own accord, rather than consent to live, the cause of death to so many others: and by putting myself to death, I should have cut in two the fatal chain of their succession, and saved their lives by the substitute of my own. And now, instead, I have been as it were their murderess, and a death to them all in female form. And now the Deity has avenged them, by sending to me at last the God of Love in human shape, whose death will be a grief to me a hundred fold more awful than any death I could have died. And I myself shall not survive him. Then why waste time in chiding one who has

but one more day to live? For as soon as night arrives, he must go like the rest to meet his doom: and certain it is, that I shall not live to see the sun rise again without him.

And as she spoke, they gazed at her, astonished. For she seemed like one that has burst the bonds of all restraint, and thrown all consideration to the eight quarters of the world. But as soon as she stopped, the old King uttered a doleful cry. And he exclaimed: Yashowatí, O daughter, what words are these? Is it any fault of thine that thou art beautiful? And wilt thou talk of abandoning the body? Then what will become of the family, of which thou art the only hope? But Aja laughed: and he said: O lovely lady, waste not thy grief on such a thing as I am: and O father-in-law, cease from bewailing calamities that are only the shadows of thy own fears cast upon the dark curtain of the future. For many are they that are doomed to die, yet never perish after all. And I have not escaped the sand to perish lightly in any other way. Be assured that the lamp of thy race is burning still

with a steady flame, not to be extinguished by a little puff of wind. To-morrow we will laugh together over these idle apprehensions, which the rising sun will dissipate together with the mists of night.

But Yashowatí turned, and looked at him with steady eyes. And she said: My husband, for such indeed thou art, the first that I have ever chosen,[1] and the last that shall ever claim my hand: dost thou think that I would have so far forgotten the reserve that is becoming to a maiden of my caste, as to offer myself like an *abhisáriká*, but that I know, as thou canst not know it, the absolute and utterly inevitable certainty of thy doom, and that this is the very last day we shall spend together, though it is also the very first? And Aja looked at her with affection: and he laughed again. And he said: Sweet wife, since thou art so very certain, then as it must be, let it be. What care I for to-morrow, if I am with thee all to-day? Knowing that but an hour ago, when first I saw thee, I would have given my life,

[1] This was the privilege of kings' daughters.

doubly dear as it was by reason of its recent escape from death, to win from thee a little love, even a very little. But as it is, a single day is life enough, provided it is spent with thee, even though I were really destined never to see another.

And she looked at him with wistful eyes; and after a while, she said: Thou art brave, and as I would have had thee. And thou dost not believe me: and it may be, it is better so. And then she turned to the King, and said: O father, go away now: and leave me alone with my husband. And be not afraid, either for thy honour or my own, for there shall be as it were a sword between us. But I wish to have him all to myself, until the end. And when the time has come, let the gong be sounded, and I will send him out to thee, and thou canst show him the way to death. And thereupon the old King went away as she desired, moaning and muttering, and wringing his hands with grief.

So when he was gone, those two lovers sat together all day long, gazing at each other

like the sunflower and the sun. And he utterly forgot the morrow, but it never left her mind, even for a single instant. And she made him relate to her his whole life from the very beginning, drinking in his words, and hanging on his lips, and watching him keenly, with eyes that never left his face, holding all the while his hand, with the grasp of one who knows that her husband must be led to execution in the evening. And she said to herself, at every moment: Still he is here: still he is here. And when the sun set, she sent for food and delicacies and wine, and fed him like a child with her own hand, tasting herself nothing. And she surfeited him with the honey of her sweetness and the syrup of her kisses and the nectar of the young new moon of beauty bathed in the sun of love, the redder [1] because of its approaching set. And all at once, she started to her feet, in the very middle of a caress. And she stood, listening. And Aja listened also: and he heard in the silence the sound of a gong.

[1] A play on words: meaning also *more affectionate.*

So as he watched her, she turned paler and ever paler, like the east at the break of dawn. And she put her two hands together, and pressed them tight against her heart, and then against her brow. And all at once, she came quickly to him, and said in a low voice: It is time. And she took his head in her hands, and kissed him, with lips that were cold as ice, and yet hot as fire, first on the eyes, and then on the mouth, and last of all upon the brow. And then she took his hand, and held it for a little while, with a clutch that almost hurt him, gazing at him with thirsty eyes. And suddenly, she threw away his hand, and pushed him away roughly, saying: Go. But Aja caught her in his arms, and kissed her yet again, as it were against her will. And he said: O fearful heart, be not afraid. Very soon, I will return. And he went away quickly, but at the door he turned, and saw her standing still, watching him with dry bright eyes, and lips that were shut tight. And at that very moment, the old King took him by the arm, and said: Come now, and I will show

thee the way by which all thy predecessors went before thee.

Then Aja said: O King, I am unarmed. Give me a weapon to carry with me. So the King took him into the armoury, and he chose for himself a sword almost as long as he was tall. But he threw away the scabbard, saying: This would only be in the way: and now I am prepared. And then the King led him away, and up a winding stair.

And when they were at the top, he stopped. And he said: O son-in-law that might have been, now fare thee well. And even I feel it harder to part with thee than with any of thy predecessors. Thou wouldst have made an altogether appropriate husband for my daughter, and O! that thou couldst have seen her dance, before thus disappearing: but now it is too late, for I doubt whether Tumburu himself could make her dance to-night, so troubled did she seem to be at bidding thee good-bye. Go out, now, through yonder door: and thou wilt be more fortunate than all the others, if thou canst manage to return through it.

Then he went back into the palace. But Aja passed through the door, and found himself on the city wall.

A Total Eclipse

तब तजि विसर जन्मभूमिम् द्वीपम् मम साकं वतरागपाचम

Then kith and kin and home forget, and all,
To sail beyond the setting sun, with me,
Where dead love's dreamy recollections call
Across the sea.

A Total Eclipse

I

AND he stood on the edge of the city wall, with his naked sword in his hand. And he looked on this side and on that, and saw the turrets of the city jutting out along the wall, like the huge black heads of elephants of war advancing in a line. And behind him lay the city, covered over with a pall of black that was edged and touched with silver points and fringes; and before him the desert stretched away, smeared as it were with ashes, under the light of the moon. And brave as he was, his heart beat, just a very little, in expectation of what was coming. And he said to himself: My father-in-law's dismissal was not very reassuring. But where then is the danger, and from what quarter is it coming, and what form will it take? For here is nothing whatever to

fight with, except the shadows cast by the moon. Or is this all merely a trick of the King to test me, before which all my predecessors have ignominiously failed? Yet no. For were it so, my wife would indeed be an actress [1] capable of reducing Tumburu to the state of ashes.

So as he stood, waiting, and smiling at his own thoughts, it happened that that daughter of Kírttisena, whose jealousy of the King's daughter had caused all the trouble in the King's city, came according to her custom flying towards the city wall. For every night she came to see whether there was a new suitor. And whenever she discovered one, she had recourse to a Rákshasa that was bound to her by obligations, who came as soon as thought of, and swallowed that unhappy suitor whole.[2] And now for some time, no new suitor had appeared. So as she came flying in the likeness

[1] An actress and a dancer are in Sanskrit denoted by the same word.

[2] This method of disposing of objectionable suitors is unfortunately not available in Europe. A great swallowing capacity is a feature of the species Rákshasa. The "coming as soon as thought of" (*dhyátágata*) is the Indian equivalent of "rubbing the lamp" in the Arabian Nights.

of a bat, she looked towards the city wall, expecting to find it empty. And she saw, instead, Aja, standing, leaning on his sword, and smiling, on the very edge of the wall. And at the very first glance at him, she was struck with stupor, and she fell that very moment so violently in love with him [1] that she could hardly flap her wings, by reason of the fierce agitation of her heart. So she alighted on the wall, a little distance off, and remained watching him, hardly able to breathe for emotion, in her own form [2] but surrounding herself with a veil of invisibility to escape his observation. And after a while, she drew a long breath, and murmured to herself: Ha! this is a suitor indeed, very different from all the others; and rather than a mere mortal man, he resembles the son of Dewakí,[3] with Rádhá

[1] *Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?* Every Oriental would side with Shakespeare in this matter: love, in the East is not love, unless it comes like a flash of lightning.

[2] This might be either that of a woman or a snake, for the Nágas, to whom she belonged, waver between the two. The Nága, it may be well to remind the reader, is a being possessed of magic powers, especially that of *glamour* or *blearing the eye*, which appealed so powerfully to Spenser and Sir Walter Scott.

[3] Krishna, whose colour, it is to be noted, is blue.

caressing him in the form of the moonlight that seems to cling affectionately to his glorious limbs. Ha! he looks like the tutelary deity of the city come to defy me, bringing the god of love to his aid in the form of his own marvellous and incomparable beauty. Aye! and I feel that I am defeated already, before the battle has so much as begun. And then, all at once, a spasm of rage shot through her heart, and she turned pale. And she exclaimed: Ah! but I am anticipated by this accursed King's daughter, who will rob me of him, nay, has already done it, by her undeniable hateful beauty, and her priority of claim. Alas! alas! O why did I not see him first, before her abominable loveliness had made an impression on his heart? For he is very young, and it must be, open to the spell of beauty, and artless, and sincere. Ha! And suddenly, she started up, as if an idea had rushed into her mind. And she stood for a moment, thinking. And then she exclaimed, with a gesture of resolution: Yes, I also am beautiful. Now, then, I will efface her image from his heart,

and replace it by my own. Now I will assault him, by all the power of my charms,[1] and we will see whether he will be proof against the glamour of a beauty such as mine, multiplied and magnified by magic sorcery and fierce determination. Aye! I will move heaven and earth to steal his heart from the King's daughter, and turn Pátála[2] upside down to make him mine instead of hers. But if I fail? And again she turned deadly pale. And after a while, a bitter smile curled over her lips. And she said: If, if I fail; no, but I will not fail. But if I fail, then, I will take another way.

[1] In every sense of the word: *mohaidlamáyá* is stronger than any English equivalent.

[2] The Underworld, the home of the snakes.

II

So as Aja stood upon the wall, looking out over the desert, suddenly all vanished from before his eyes. And he saw before him no city, and no desert. But he found himself in a dusky wood, thick with tall *tamála* [1] trees, and lit by a light that was neither that of the sun nor that of the moon. And all around him huge red poppies waved gently without a wind, mixed with great moon-lotuses, whose perfume went and came by turns as it hung on the heavy air. And under the shadow of the black-leaved trees large bats flew here and there with slow and noiseless flap, and on the branches monstrous owls with topaz eyes like wheels of flame sat motionless, as if to watch. And a dead silence like that of space whence all three worlds have been removed left Aja nothing else to hear but the beat of his own

[1] A tree with very black bark and white blossoms, dear to erotic poets, such as, *e.g.*, Jayadewa.

heart. And the hair rose up upon his head with sheer amazement. And he said to himself: Ha! what new wonder is this, and what has become of the city wall? And where in the world have I got to now, and how? Now let me be very wary, for the danger is evidently coming near.

And as he stood, grasping his sword, prepared, and looking quickly right and left, suddenly he saw a thing which rivetted his gaze to it, as if with an iron nail.

A little way off, among the poppies, was standing up like a lonely column all that was left of one of the walls of a ruined temple, whose fallen pillars were lying scattered all around it, half concealed by creeping leaves. And as he gazed intently at this upright fragment of a fallen wall, he saw upon it the image of a sculptured woman, which stood out so distinctly that he could not take his eyes from it. And after a while, he said to himself: Surely that can be no stone statue, but a real woman of flesh and blood, actually leaning, who knows why, against that bit of a broken

wall. And he looked and looked, and after a while, filled with irresistible curiosity, he went nearer, but very slowly, and as it were on his guard, to see.

So as he gazed, wonder and admiration gradually crept into his soul, and stole his recollection unaware. And he became wholly intent on the stone image, and forgetful of his situation. And he ceased to wonder at finding himself in the wood, so great was his new wonder at the beauty of the woman on the wall. And he said to himself: Surely he was a master artist, whoever he was, that made this woman out of stone, if stone indeed she be. For even now, near as I am, I can hardly believe she is made of stone.

And the more he looked, the more he marvelled. For she seemed in his eyes like a frozen mass of lunar camphor, moulded into a female form, standing cold and pure and still, alone by herself in that strange half light, that hovered as it were irresolute between the natures of night and day. And she stood with her right hand on her hip, which jutted out to

receive it like the curve of a breaking wave: and her bare right breast stood out and shone like a great moonlit sea pearl, while the other was hiding behind the curling fold of the pale green garment that ran around her, embracing her with clinging clasp like a winding wisp of emerald foam fondly wrapping the yielding waist of Wishnu's sea-born wife. And she was very tall, and shaped like Shrí, and she stood with her head a little bent, and her sightless eyes fixed as it were on empty space, just as though she were listening for some expected sound. And as he continued to gaze at her, a wonder that was almost horror crept into his mind. For her face was not like that of an image, but rather resembled a mask, or the face of a very beautiful woman, that very moment dead. For the colour seemed as it were to have only just faded from her cheek, and the blood seemed only just before to have left her pallid lips, and the sight was as it were hanging yet in her great long open eyes, that were fixed on the distant sky. And he stood, gazing, as if the very sight of her had

made of him another image like herself.

And then, at last, he stepped forward. And he put out his left hand, and touched her with his forefinger on the shoulder that was bare.

And instantly, as if his touch had filled her with a flood of life, a shiver ran like quicksilver over her stony limbs. And as he started back, to watch, the colour came back into her face, and red blood rushed into her lips, and deep blue suddenly filled her eyes. And the tresses of hair around her head turned all of a sudden a glossy black, that shone with a blue-green lustre, as if reflecting the grassy sheen of her winding robe. And her bosom lifted slowly, and fell again with a deep sigh. And all at once, she abruptly altered her position, and her eyes fell straight on Aja, standing just before her. And she lifted up, first one eyebrow, and then the other, till they formed a perfect bow, for they joined each other in the middle. And she uttered a faint cry, as if in joy, exclaiming: Ha! can it be, and is it thou? Or am I dreaming still?

III

And Aja stood, staring at her with stony gaze, like a mirror of her own surprise. And he said to himself: Surely it is not she, but I myself, that am the dreamer. For here since the sun rose last, I have escaped the desert, and found this city without a man, and acquired a bride of peerless beauty: and now here is another, rising as it were from the dead, and seeming to expect me. And he continued standing silent, gazing at her, sword in hand. And after a while, she said: What! is my form, then, so frightful as to rob thee of thy tongue? Or art thou going to use that sword against me? Speak: but in the meanwhile, let me see whether I have lost the use of my limbs, as thou hast that of thy tongue, after so long a sleep. And she leaped from her little pedestal, and moved a little way here and there, waving her beautiful arms about: and after

a while, she came back, and sat down just before him, on one of the fallen pillars that were lying about the ground. And all the while Aja watched her, as if fascinated by a serpent, saying within himself: She moves like nothing I ever saw, save a panther or a gliding snake.[1] And then, all at once, she again put up one eyebrow, and said to him with a smile: Must I, then, actually tell thee, that I am Natabhrúkutí?[2] Then Aja said: O lady, it is obvious. For thy bent brow would plant arrows even in the heart of the Great Ascetic. And she said again: O husband, is this thy welcome, after so long a separation?

And Aja bounded, as if bitten by a snake. And he exclaimed: Thy husband! What! Am I then thy husband also? Does thy whole sex want to get me for a husband? But O thou beauty of bending brows, how can he be thy husband, that never saw thee in his life before? And only this morning, I was still

[1] It is a wonderful thing to see a cobra move. Nothing can describe it.

[2] That is, *the Beauty of the arched eyebrows.* (Pronounce *Nat-* to rhyme with *but.*)

wifeless, and a day has not elapsed, since I became another's husband. And he stopped short, again confounded at the effect of his own words. For hardly had they passed his lips, when Natabhrúkutí started up, swelling with rage and convulsed with fury, with eyes that blazed like fiery stars. And she exclaimed: Never! never! Never shall she possess thee, nor any other than I myself. And then, like a flash of lightning, her rage vanished as quickly as it came. And she looked at him with imploring eyes, and said: Slay me now, with thy long bright sword, and send me back to that nonentity out of which thou hast just recalled me: but speak not of another woman in front of me. Alas! and am I all forgotten? And tears rolled from her great blue eyes, and fell like suppliants at her feet.

And Aja put up his left hand, and tugged at his hair in the extremity of his amazement. And he said: O thou strange offended lady, I am utterly bewildered, and resemble one that has lost his way at midnight in a wood.

And thy anger and thy grief are alike altogether incomprehensible. How can I possibly have forgotten one, whom as I just now told thee, I never saw in my life before? Then she said: Nay, not in this life, but the last. For I was the wife of thy former birth.

Then Aja laughed, and he said: O beauty, who remembers his former birth? For like every other man, and like my ancestor the sun, I have risen up into light out of the sea of dark oblivion, into which I must sink again at last. And then she looked at him with a deep sigh. And she said: Alas! This is a punishment indeed, and worse by far than all the rest, if after having endured so long the state of a stone upon a wall, I am again become a woman, only to find myself repudiated and all forgotten, by him, on whose account I suffered all. Listen, then, and I will tell thee the story of thy former birth. It may be that, in the hearing, some scattered reminiscences will be as it were awakened, to stir again in the dark lethargy of thy sleeping soul.

IV

And then she began to speak. And as she spoke, she leaned forward, as she sat upon the fallen pillar, and fastened her great eager eyes like magnets on his own. And as Aja watched them, they played as it were upon his heart. For their colour wavered and changed and faltered, shifting ever from hue to hue, turning golden and ruddy amber, and emerald-green and lotus-blue; and over her eyes her arching brows lifted and fell and played and flickered, fixing his troubled soul like nails, and rivetting his attention, till her singing voice sounded in his head like a distant tune crooned in the ear of a sleepy man. And she waved slowly her long round arms, all the while she spoke. And she said: Far away, over the sea, lies thy own forgotten land, and presently I will tell thee, and even show thee, where it is. And there it was, in our former birth, that

thou and I were boy and girl. But thou wert the son of a mighty King, and I was only a Brahmani, a poor man's daughter, and my father was an old ascetic, far below thee in everything else but caste. And I lived alone with my old father, in the very heart of a great forest, in a little hut of bark, over which the *málati* creeper grew so thick that nothing was visible of that little hut, except its door. And then one day I was seen by thee, standing still in that very door, with my pitcher on my head: as thou wert passing through the wood to hunt upon thy horse. And that moment was like a sponge, that blotted from the mind of each everything but the other's image. And I made of thee my deity, and forgot everything in the three great worlds, for thee alone. And thou, that day, didst clean forget thy hunting: or rather, the God of Love showed thee game of another kind,[1] and from pursuing thou didst fall to wooing a quarry that wished for nothing so much as to be thy prey. And we

[1] In Sanskrit, hunting and wooing can be mixed up together by plays on words.

married each other that very day, which ah! thou hast all forgotten. What! dost thou not remember how I used to meet thee every day in the little hut, when my father was away in the wood engaged in meditation? What! hast thou really all forgotten how it was thy supreme delight to bring me garments and costly jewels, which I put on for thy amusement, thy forest-queen of the little hut? Has thy memory cast away every vestige of reminiscence of thy old sweet love in the little hut? So then it happened that on a day we were together, blind and drunk with each other's presence, shut within the little hut like a pair of bees in a nectared lotus. And I was standing like an idol, dressed like the queen of a *chakrawarti,*[1] loaded with gold on wrists and feet, with great pearls wound about my neck; and thou wert contemplating me, thy creature,[2] with intoxication, and hard indeed it was to tell which of us two was the idol, and which was the devotee. And as we woke up

[1] An emperor. Hindoo idols are dressed and undressed, like dolls, by their officiating priests.

[2] She means, he was her Creator.

from a kiss that lasted like infinity, lo! my father stood before us. And he said slowly: Abandoned daughter, that hast forgot thy duty in thy passion for this King's son, become what thou hast represented, an idol [1] of stone on the wall of a ruined temple far away: and thou, her guilty lover, fall again into another birth, and be separated from thy guilty love. Then being besought by us, to fix some period to the curse, he said again: When ye two shall meet again, and thy husband in his curiosity shall touch thee with his finger, she shall regain her woman's state, and be as she was before. And now all this has come about, exactly as he said. And I have found thee once again, only to find alas! alas! that thou hast left thy heart behind thee in that old delicious birth.

[1] The Hindoos have no word, because they have not the idea, of an *idol*. They call it a *god* or an *image*. Our word *idol* implies the antagonism to paganism involved in Christianity, and no two books are more alike than S. Augustine's *City of God* and Ward's *Hindoo Mythology*.

V

So as he listened, Aja's soul was filled as it were with a mingled essence of wonder and irresolution and sheeny beauty and singing sound. For the tone of her voice was like a lute, and before his eyes hovered a picture of waving arms and witching curves, out of which her dreamy eyes, from which he could not take his own, seemed as it were to speak to him of love reproachful and old regret. And all at once, with a violent effort, he roused himself as if from sleep with open eyes. And he shifted his sword to the other hand, and passed his right across his brow. And he said, in some confusion: O thou strange and sweet-tongued woman, certain this much is, that I am filled by thee with emotion that I do not understand. And yet I know not what to think, or even say. For even apart from the promptings of a former birth, thy beauty and

thy haunting voice, which I seem as it were to have heard before, are quite sufficient to rouse emotion even in a stone, much more in a man of flesh and blood.

Then she shook her head sadly, looking at him with glistening eyes; and she said, with a smile of ineffable sweetness: Ah! this is as I thought, and the instinct of thy former birth is clouded over and effaced, by thy meeting with this other woman in the morning of this very day. Alas! how small, how very small, the interval of space and time that divides the paradise of joy from the dungeon of despair! For had this our reunion been sooner by only a single day, I should have caught thy heart before it had been occupied by this all too fortunate other woman, who now holds it like a fortress, garrisoned by a prior claim. But what is this priority of claim? Can she, who by thine own confession has known thee only a single day, dare to dispute priority with the darling of thy former birth?[1] Wilt thou

[1] Though, in Europe, this insidious appeal might lack force, it is otherwise in India: whose millions doubt their former birth

break thy faith with me, to keep thy faith with her? Aye! and wilt thou, after all, gain so much by the exchange? Is she beautiful, then, this other woman? But I am beautiful, too? And she stood up, and looked at Aja with her head thrown back and proud eyes, as though to challenge his condemnation of her own consummate beauty. And she said again: Is she, then, this other beauty, either more faithful or more beautiful than I am? Speak, and tell me if thou canst, in what I am inferior, or why I am to be despised, in comparison with her.

And Aja looked at her again, and felt abashed, and half ashamed, he knew not why. And he murmured to himself: She does not lie: for beautiful she is indeed, and need not fear comparison with any woman in the world. And it may be, she is partly right, and if I had met her yesterday, before my heart was full, she would have had little difficulty in entering in and capturing it, almost without resistance.

no more than they doubt their own existence. It is not long since a woman in Cutch burned herself with her own dead son, because, she averred, he had been her husband in her former birth.

And he stood looking at her silently, uncertain what to say or do, and half inclined to pity her, and half afraid of her and of himself, admiring her against his will, and as it were confessing by his very silence the power of her appeal. For notwithstanding the preoccupation of his heart, his youth and his sex became as it were allies with her against his resolution, compelling him to acknowledge the supremacy of the cunning god, and the spell of feminine attraction incarnate in her form.

And she stood there before him, for a little, with beauty as it were heightened by resentful reproach of the slighting of itself, and the disregard of its tried affection. And then all at once she sank down upon the ground, as if she were tired, and remained sitting among the poppies, with her chin resting on her left knee, which she embraced with her arms, watching him, and as it were, waiting with humility and patience for a decision in her case. And every now and then, she closed her eyes, and opened them again, as if to make sure that he was there.

And Aja looked round in the silence, at the poppies and the lotuses, and the great owls that seemed to watch him, and back again at her. And his head began to whirl, and he muttered to himself: Is this a dream, and what does it all mean? And is she returning to the condition of an image, disgusted by my coldness and disdain? And what is to be done? And he looked at her face, deprived, by the closing of their lids, of the moon of her eyes, and resting like a mask upon its chin. And he said within himself: Her eyebrows move, as if they were alive. And he felt as it were unable to look away from them: and at last, annoyed with himself, he closed his eyes also, as though to escape their persecution.

VI

And then, he said to himself: This is cowardice, and after all, no refuge; for I seem to see her still, through the shutters of my lids. And he opened his eyes once more. And instantly, he leaped from the ground like a wounded stag, with a cry. For the wood, with all its lotuses and poppies, was gone. And in its place, he saw before him a forest with its great green trees all lit by the shining of the sun. And just in front of him there stood a little hut, buried in the blossom of the *málatí* creeper. And in its doorway was standing a young Brahman woman, with a pitcher on her head. And she beckoned to him with a smile, and he looked, and lo! it was Natabhrúkutí. Then moved as if against his will, on feet that carried him towards her as it were of their own accord, he approached her. And as he drew nearer, there came from that creeper a

wave of perfume, resembling that of jasmine, but sweeter, and so pungent that it entered like fire into his soul. And then she lifted the pitcher from her head, and set it down upon the ground, and caught him by the hand, and drew him within the hut. And there she cast herself into his arms, whispering in his ear, very low, so as to caress it as she spoke with her lips: My father is away, and now we are alone, and the day is all before us. Come now, what shall I do for thy delight? And she ran and shut the door; and then, taking from a chest rich clothes and splendid jewels, she began to put them on, saying as she did so: See! am I becoming more fit to be thy queen? And he watched her, stupefied, like one in a dream, and all the while she bathed him with intoxicating side glances shot like arrows from the bow of her arching brows. And at last, she came slowly towards him, walking on tip-toe, and attitudinising, placing herself exactly in the posture in which he had seen her first among the poppies on the wall, with one hand on her hip. And she said, lifting her brow, with a

smile that stole his reason: Now, then, the idol is ready for the devotee. And at that moment the door opened, and an old Brahman entered through it. And he said slowly: Abandoned daughter, that hast forgot thy duty in thy passion for this King's son, become what thou hast represented, an idol of stone on the wall of a ruined temple far away; and thou her guilty lover, fall into another birth, and be separated from thy guilty love.

And then, Aja heard no more. The world whirled around him; the blackness of night closed over his soul; he uttered a terrible cry, and fell to the ground in a swoon.

VII

And when he came to himself, he was back again among the poppies in the *tamála* wood. And he was lying on the ground, with Natabhrúkutí bending over him, holding him by the hand, with anxiety in her eyes. And instantly he started up, and seizing his sword, stood gazing at her with stupefaction. And he said to himself: Am I dead or dreaming? And what does it all mean? Is it a delusion of the Creator, or a mirage and a madness of the desert, out of which I have never yet escaped at all? Aye! beyond a doubt, I am wandering still in the waste of sand, raving mad, and dying, and haunted by phantoms that are the premonitors of approaching death.

So as he stood, balancing in the swing of perplexity, and doubting his own reason, Natabhrúkutí looked at him fixedly, with concern and affection and curiosity in her eyes.

And she said: Surely thou art ill. And why then dost thou shrink from me, as though I were a thing of terror: I, who ask for nothing but to tend thee all my life? For it was but now, as we spoke together in this wood, I looked up and saw thee suddenly close thy eyes. And as I watched thee, wondering to see thee sleeping as it were erect, there burst from thy lips a fearful cry, and I had but time to catch thee falling, and let thee sink upon the ground. And I brought thee to thyself, by fanning thee, as well as I might, with this great leaf.

And she held it up before him, while he continued to gaze at her in silence. And as he did not speak, she looked at him curiously, and muttered under her breath, as though speaking to herself, and not intending him to hear: Can he have suddenly recollected his former birth, and is this the reason why he is staring at me, as if wishing to compare me with a picture in his head? And as he still kept silence, presently she said aloud: Dear, thou art sick: and much in need of medicines, such as I alone can

give thee. Why wilt thou not confide in me? For I am a cunning leech, and know the virtue of every herb and every vegetable drug better than Dhanwantari[1] himself. And I have made myself mistress of every species of the art of healing, and in particular, I have fed myself on perfumes, and on the essences of flowers, and all the scented odours of aromatic shrubs, till I have myself become as it were a very attar, incarnate in a woman's form. Dost thou doubt it, and think me to be boasting? then try me, and I will prove to thee my power by experiment, in any way thou wilt. I will soothe and shampoo[2] thee with a hand softer than a snowflake's fall and cooler than the icy moon: or, if thou wilt, I will croon to thee old airs, and put thee to sleep like a tired child, resting thy head on this bosom which once was thy delight, with melodies that shall speak to thee of drowzy bees and moaning winds: or I will steal thy waking senses from thee and lure them into slumber as it were

[1] The physician of the gods, the Hindoo Æsculapius.

[2] The *Samwáhanam* is one of those old Hindoo medical resources which we have only recently been wise enough to copy.

against thy will by snaring them with fragrances more luscious than that *párijáta* blossom, which Wishnu once trailed through the intoxicated world, to drive it into madness at the moment, and leave it filled with inconsolable regret when it was gone. See, take this, and smell it, and thou wilt be better even now.

And she held out towards him, in the lotus of her hand, a tiny flower, in colour like an atom of the concentrated essence of the sky. And as Aja looked at it, there came from it a stream of a sharp and biting scent, that rushed into his soul, coming laden as it were with reminiscence and suggestions of the past; so that he said to himself: Ha! of what does this remind me, and where is it that I smelled its almost intolerable sweet before? And suddenly, the little hut rushed into his mind, and he exclaimed: It is the very smell of the creeper on its roof. And instantly, a feeling of amazement that almost overcame him, mingled with terror, crept like a shudder over his limbs, and his hair stood on end. And he looked at Natabhrúkutí, who was watching him intently,

and said, hoarsely: Who art thou, thou strange beauty, and what dost thou want of me? And what is the meaning of these inexplicable mysteries, before which I feel as if my reason were deserting me, and I were about to faint again?

VIII

THEN she laughed, and said: Fair boy, I am only that bitter-sweet,[1] a woman: and I want no more than what every woman wants, the man she loves, and that is thou. Aye! dost thou ask me, who and what I am? Listen then, and I will tell thee. I am a bee, which not like other bees roams roving to flower after flower, but confines itself exclusively to one. I am a breeze, which not like other breezes blows fickle and inconstant now hither and now thither, but is fixed and ever steady, coming straight from Malaya laden with the sandal of affection to lay it at thy feet. I am only the echo of a voice which is thyself, the shadow of a substance and the reflection of a sun. I am like the other half of the god that carries the moon upon his head, the twin, the duplicate and counterpart of a deity who is

[1] *Wishámritam:* lit. poison-nectar.

thou. I am Rati, rejoicing to find again the body of her husband, and thou art Love himself returned to life whom I have found. I am an essence of the ocean, but unlike it, I hold within my heart not many pearls, but only one, which is thyself. I am a wick, consuming in thy flame, and like the music of a lute, I am a thing wholly compounded of melodies and tones, whose mood and being are dependent on the player, who is thou. Art thou sad? then I am also: art thou joyous? so am I: my soul is tossed about, and hangs on thy smiling or thy sighing, as a criminal depends on the sentence of the judge. And like a crystal, I am colourless [1] without thee, but ready on the instant to assume every tinge of the colour of thyself. Cast thy eyes upon me, and thou shalt see as in a glass thy every mood painted on the surface of my face. Ah! dost thou ask me what I am? Alas! I am a target for the poisoned arrows which Love shoots at me in the form of thy beauty greater than his own. And I am like a bare and with-

[1] Also means *without affection.*

ered, leafless and frost-bitten tree, which has suddenly shot up into blossom at the coming of spring in thy form. But as for thee, why, O why dost thou regard me that live for only thee as if I were a deadly snake, and thou a startled deer? In vain, in vain, dost thou endeavour to repel me, for I will not be repelled. I will melt thy cold ice in thy despite, by the fire of my affection, and drown thee in its flood, and sweep thee away from the rocks of thy resistance till thou art lost for ever in its dark and pearly depths.

And as Aja stood, listening in confusion to her words, which poured from her like a torrent, suddenly she clapped her hands, and exclaimed, as he started again at her vehemence: Ha! shall I tell thee, thou wilful and reluctant boy, of what thou dost remind me, standing as it were aghast, and obstinately set against me, mute, and yet asking what I am? Know, that long ago there was a king, who had for wives a thousand queens. And it happened that one day, he went with his wives to ramble in the heart of a forest. So after sporting for a

while, he grew tired, in the heat of the day, and lay down and fell asleep. Then all his queens stole away and left him lying, and went roaming up and down, very strange creatures in that wild rough wood, looking like living flowers of every hue and kind, that had somehow or other got free from their roots, a body of deer-eyed decoys let loose by Love the Hunter, to lure into his toils every man that should behold them. So as they rambled here and there, they came suddenly on an old ascetic. And he was standing still, half buried in the hills of ants, themselves covered over by his long white hair, immersed in meditation. Then all those fair women went up and stood around him in a cluster of beautiful curiosity, wondering at the sight of him, and asking each other in amazement, what in the world he could possibly be. So as they crowded round him, that old ascetic emerged from his trance, and as thou art doing, stood silent and aghast, thinking, as perhaps thou dost thyself, that Indra must have sent him all the nymphs of heaven in a body, to lure him from the path of

liberation. For, O, thou beautiful suspicious youth, what is there so terrible about me, as to cause thee to shrink from my approach? Know, that many would be glad to be wooed as was that old ascetic, and as thou art now.

IX

And then, Aja strove to awake as it were from a dream. And he shook himself, as if to shake it off, and he said to himself: I feel that I am falling as it were a victim to the spell of this passionate and subtle beauty; and now, unless I stiffen and steel myself against her, I shall undoubtedly be bewitched and beguiled beyond the possibility of escape. And he summoned his resolution, and said, with a semblance of composure: Fair one, thou dost thyself no injustice in comparing thyself alone to a thousand queens: for thou art a very incarnation of all the bewildering fascination of thy sex. And yet, potent as they are, thy charms are wasted, and resemble blunted arrows when directed against me. For as I have already told thee, I am pledged to another, and proof against thy spell, as doubtless was thy old ascetic against that bevy of straying queens.

And then Natabhrúkutí smiled, and she shook at him her finger, as she answered: Rash boy, beware! Be not too sure of the adamantine quality of thy resistance, nor even of thy wisdom in resisting me at all. And beware of provoking the indignation of slighted Love, who may make of thee a signal example of his vengeance. Take care, lest annoyed with thy obstinacy in rejecting what he offers thee for nothing, he should deprive thee even of that other beauty, on whose account alone it is that I am held by thee so cheap. Poor youth! but that my lips are tied, I could enlighten thee. Art thou, who art so ready lightly to disdain me, art thou, I say, so sure, so very sure, that thou art thyself the only lover of this much married beauty, whom thou sawest, as thou sayest, for the very first time in thy life to-day? Art thou so sure, so very sure, that she is not deceiving thee, and that thou art not merely the last of the many lovers whom she toys with for a moment, and then carelessly casts away? Art thou so very certain that thou hast never had a predecessor?

And Aja started, in spite of himself. For the word recalled to him the manner of the old King. And Natabhrúkutí saw it. And she looked at him as it were with compassion, and said: Alas, unhappy boy: thou seest that in thy youth and inexperience such an idea had not occurred to thee. Little art thou qualified to cope with a woman's guile.

Then said Aja fiercely, in wrath both with himself and her: It is false, and she is true. But Natabhrúkutí answered very gently: Be not angry, for I do not question that she loves thee. I do not even doubt it: for if she did not, she would be a fool. But listen, and learn, what thou dost not seem to know, that Love is a Master Knave; aye! by far the greatest master of deceit in the three great worlds. And woman is his aptest pupil, and every woman living, were she even as simple as thyself, becomes, as soon as she falls under the influence of Love, a very incarnation of policy and craft and wiles. I tell thee, foolish boy, that she that loves in earnest, were she good as gold, pure as snow, and flawless as a

diamond, would plunge, to gain her object, to the very lowest bottom of the ocean of deceit. And what is her object but the esteem of her lover? Dost thou think she would balance for an instant, between her lover and the ruin of the world? between his good opinion, and a lie? Dost thou think she would forfeit thy esteem, when to deceive thee would preserve it? I tell thee, in such a dilemma, she would lie, till the very sun at noon hid his face out of shame. Know,[1] that long ago there lived at Wáránasi[2] an independent lady, of beauty so extraordinary, that swarms of lovers used to buzz continually about her like great black bees about the mango blossom in the spring. But independent though she was, she was so fastidious, that none of her innumerable lovers ever touched her heart even for a moment. And hence she lived like a lamp at midnight surrounded by the corpses of her victims, who

[1] In all Oriental stories, statements are proved not by Aristotelian syllogism, but by "instances": and we are reminded of the opinion of the artful Retz, that "*one never persuades anybody, but anybody can insinuate anything.*"

[2] Benáres. The lady in question was one of those Hindoo Aspasias of whom many similar stories are told.

fluttered about her lustre and perished in its flame. And then at last, one day it came about that a tall young Rajpoot almost as beautiful as thou art arrived at Wáránasí. And Kasháyiní [1] (for that was her name) saw him from a window as he came into the city; and instantly like an empty pitcher suddenly plunged into the Ganges, she was filled to the very brim by the inrush of Love's sacred nectar. And she said to herself: The very first thing that he will hear of in the city is myself. And like everybody else, he will come immediately to see me: and that very moment, I shall abandon the body out of shame. For though my beauty might attract him, yet he will be convinced that many lovers have preceded him, and therefore, at the bottom of his heart he will despise me. And this would be worse than any death. And yet without him, my birth will have been in vain. Therefore, I must devise some expedient. So after a while, she went out in disguise, and bought for a large sum of money the body of

[1] Which we might translate Aromatic: it includes the ideas of *red colour* and *pungent perfume*.

a woman of her own age and size who had died that very day. And bringing that body home secretly at night, she dressed it in her own clothes, and burned it till its identity was obliterated. And then she set fire to her house, and left it by a back door, and went away, abandoning all her wealth but the jewels that she wore, for the sake of her picture in the air.[1] And at that very moment, the Rajpoot came along, led by some of the townspeople to visit her, as it were set on fire by the very description of her beauty. And he looked and saw the flames bursting from her house, as though lit by himself. And they found the half burned body in the ashes, and immediately all the lovers of Ḳasháyiní followed her through the fire of grief to the other world. But the Rajpoot managed, in spite of disappointment, to remain alive. And she, in the meantime, having given every one the slip, found a false ascetic, and bribed him with jewels, giving him instructions without letting him know who she was. So that ascetic went

[1] Or, as we say, castle in the air.

and struck up acquaintance with the Rajpoot, pretending to be a discoverer of treasure.[1] And he performed incantations, and, after a while, he said to him: Go quickly to Ujjayini, and dig in the north-east corner of the burning ground outside the city on the very last day of the dark half of the month of Magha, and thou shalt find a treasure. Take it, for what is the use of treasure to such a one as me. Thereupon that Rajpoot, having nothing else to do, went. And Kasháyiní, having first made sure that the bait had taken, went herself and got there before him. So when that Rajpoot arrived, he dug exactly as he was told, and found absolutely nothing. And cursing his destiny, he went out of the burning ground in the early morning: and as he went along, suddenly he saw Kasháyiní, who was waiting for him, sitting weeping by the wayside, under a great *ashwattha* tree: beautifully dressed, blazing with jewels, and adorned with saffron and antimony, betel, indigo, and spangles, flowers, minium, and henna, bangles on

[1] A regular trade in medieval India.

ankle and comb in her hair. And she said to that Rajpoot, who was as utterly astounded by the sight of her as if she had been water in the desert: O son of a king, succour one who is utterly without resource. And when he asked her, what was the matter, she said: I was the only wife of a very rich merchant, and as we travelled from the South, suddenly we were set upon by a band of Thags. And after killing every one but me,[1] they all went to sleep, thinking me secure; but in the middle of the night, I went a little way, and hid myself in a hollow tree. And in the morning those villains, after hunting for me in vain, all went away, fearing a pursuit, and I came out of the tree trembling, and reached this road, and now I am alone in the world. Then said the Rajpoot to himself: Ha! so, after all, I have found my treasure, and that excellent ascetic was a true prophet. And he said: O lady, I am of good family. And now, if thou wilt have me for a husband, I will supply the loss of thy

[1] Everything in this story is exactly in harmony with the manners of medieval India. The Thags often preserved a woman for her beauty, when they murdered every one else.

merchant, and all the rest of thy relations. And she feigned reluctance: but after a while, she dried her tears, and consented. But that Rajpoot almost went out of his mind, so great was his delight. And one day he told her of Wáránasí, and the burning of Kasháyiní. And she looked at him with laughing eyes, and said: O my husband, I will make up to thee for the loss of Kasháyiní: for I am just as beautiful as she.

X

AND as Natabhrúkutí ended, she leaned forward, and gazed at Aja with soft seductive eyes, till he blushed, and wavered before her like the flame of a candle in a wind. For her beauty bewildered him, and her cunning story planted, as if against his will, the seed of suspicion in his mind. And in spite of himself, he said to himself: What if it were as she says, and my wife, like another Kasháyiní, were concealing from me something that she shrank from avowing, lest I should think the worse of her. And he turned pale at the thought, that any other lover should, even a very little, have occupied her heart before him. And he stood silent, and confused, striving to expel from his mind the doubt that Natabhrúkutí had raised in it, saying to himself: Can I really be only the last of many lovers? And all the

while Natabhrúkutí watched him, devouring him as it were with her eyes. And at last, she said again: Sweet boy, thou art too young and too honest to cope with women, who were framed by the Creator to deceive. But Aja said angrily: Thou art thyself a woman, seeking at this very moment to deceive me: and as for thy age, it is less than my own. And she said: Nay, nay: I am older, for I am wiser than thyself. For when I see my husband, I remember him, but me thou hast utterly forgotten, thy true and only wife. Ah! foolish one, thou hast forgotten. And thou resemblest one, who casts away a costly jewel, for the sake of a bit of glass, shining only in the sunlight of thy ignorance, and trodden by the foot of every passing stranger. What! can I do nothing to rouse thy recollection? Look at me well! look hard, and it may be, something of me will touch as it were a chord in thy soul.

And she came up close to him, so that the warmth and fragrance of her beauty enveloped him like an atmosphere of intoxication.

And she joined her hands, looking up into his face, as it were compelling his reluctant admiration by her humble submission to his will. And she said: Hast thou, hast thou indeed forgotten all? And as he gazed at her, two huge drops of crystal welled into her eyes, and hung poised before they fell on the net of her long dark lashes. And she said: Thou sayest, I am seeking to deceive thee. I love thee, and where is the deception? Is it not rather thou that art the deceiver in this matter? Is it any fault of mine if another has stepped in to defraud me of thyself? Or am I to be blamed, if thy beauty still beguiles me as it did long ago? And yet, dost thou accuse me as if I were a criminal? O blue black bee, what is this behaviour, that thou seekest as it were to pick a quarrel with the poor red lotus who loves thee but too well? And she smiled through her tears, and exclaimed: Ah! but in spite of thee, I will adore thee, whether thou wilt or no. Ha! and I will compel thee to remember, and force my way through every barrier and obstacle till I reach the recollec-

tion [1] in the bottom of thy heart. O canst thou not remember the days of long ago, when my now despisèd beauty was a joy to thee, and my hair a very net to snare thy willing soul, and my eyes were more to thee than any diamonds, and these two arms were thy prison and thy chain, and this agitated bosom was thy pillow on which I lulled thee to slumber with the music of this very voice? Hast thou really forgotten the nectar of my kiss? hast thou actually forgotten thy own insatiable thirst? Ah! but if thou hast forgotten, I have not: and the innumerable multitudes of thy too delicious kisses come back to me, singing in my memory, and whispering in my soul like the lisping of the sea. Hark! Dost thou not hear them also, those voices of a former birth?

[1] The reader should remember that in Sanskrit, *love* and *recollection* are the same word.

XI

AND as Aja gazed at her, stunned and almost overcome by the pathos of her irresistible appeal, and as it were swept from his feet by the surge of her passion, suddenly she seized his left hand with her right, and stood, grasping it as if convulsively, with the other hand raised, and bending her head, as if to listen. And he listened, and lo! there sounded in his ears a murmur resembling that of the sea, mixed with faint strains of music, and echoes of indistinguishable singing voices coming as it were from the ends of the earth. And a shudder ran through him, as she turned, and looked at him as if in ecstasy, with eyes that saw nothing, murmuring in an eager voice that chanted and charmed his ear like the rushing of a stream: Dost thou hear the voices, calling thee over to the other shore? For the sea is the sea of separation, and the

other shore is our former birth. Far away over the setting sun hides the red land [1] of our old sweet love. And I can take thee back to it, out of this dim and dingy wood. Only I can carry thee back to the land beyond the sunset hill, where love is lying dead. Over the sea where monsters lurk, and great pearls grow in sunless deeps, I can carry thee back again to the land of long ago. Never a ship with a silken sail could rock thee over across the waves so well as I will waft thee there on the swell of this soft breast. Never a breeze from the sandal hill could ferry thee over a silent sea so gently as will I, by breathing into thy raptured ear tales of thy old forgotten past with fond and fragrant lips. What! art thou still oblivious of that old delicious birth? Dost thou never behold in dreams the paradise of our little hut, and slake again thy raging thirst in a long forbidden kiss? Does she never come back to thee, the Bráhmani girl with a face like mine, with lips that laughed and eyes

[1] The Sanskrit *dwipa* has exactly the same connotation as our islands of the Blest, and like them it is placed in the setting sun.

that shone, and a mango flower in her hair? Say, dost thou never dream of her? And she shook his arm with frenzy, and exclaimed: Ha! wake from thy magic sleep, and tear away the curtain that hides me from thy blinded soul. I will, I will awake thee. I will not be forgotten. And all at once, she burst into a passion of tears. And she reeled, as though about to fall, and tottered, and threw herself, sobbing hard, against his breast.

And while she spoke, Aja stood, like one pushed to the very edge of a precipice, pale as death, and breathing hard, spellbound. And then at last, when she threw herself upon his breast, again a shudder ran through all his limbs. And as if her touch had shattered to pieces the last fragment of his resolution, he caught her around the waist with the one arm that was free. And with tears in his own eyes, he stammered, as if in the extremity of desperation, hardly knowing what he said: Alas! I have been harsh to thee. O lovely browed beauty, cease to weep. Why, O why, did I not meet thee sooner by only a single day?

XII

And at that very moment, he heard behind him a deep sigh. And as he turned, wood, poppies, and all vanished from before his eyes. Once more he stood on the city wall; and there before him was the King's daughter. And she was standing in the doorway through which he had come upon the wall, leaning against the open door, and paler than Love's own ashes, while her great dark eyes were frozen as it were to ice, and yet lit up by the triple fire of sorrow and reproach and fierce disdain. And she looked like the daughter of Janaka, when forsaken by the lord of the race of Raghu, and like the heavenly Urwashi, when abandoned by Pururawas, a very spirit of despair carved by the Creator into a stony female form, to break the heart of the three worlds. And as if the very sight of her had broken the spell that held him, reason and

recollection suddenly returned to Aja, as it were at a single bound. And he woke, as if from a magic sleep, and on the instant, a sword ran as it were straight into his heart. And with a cry, he flung away his sobbing burden like a blade of grass, not caring where it fell: and ran towards the King's daughter. But she, when she saw him coming, shrieked, and started, and exclaimed: Away! Touch me not, save with the point of thy sharp true sword, to pierce me through the body as thy perfidy has my soul.

Then Aja tossed away his sword, with a shudder, over the edge of the wall. And he seized himself by the head with both hands, with a groan like the roar of a wounded lion. And he exclaimed: Ha! Better now it had been indeed, had I never emerged from the waste of sand. And he turned fiercely upon Natabhrúkutí, saying: This is thy doing, thou vile enchantress: and now I am indeed awake.

But even as he spoke, the words died away upon his lips; and he stood still, like a picture on a wall, for wonder at what he saw before

him. For Natabhrúkutí was standing still, exactly where he left her, bolt upright, like a spear fixed in the earth. And her beauty was greater than ever, and yet such, that as he saw it, his heart stopped in his breast. For every vestige of the nectar of her love-emotion had left her, and in its place, the poison of immortal hate shone in her cold and evil eyes, which were fastened, as if with a mixture of pain and pleasure, with a glittering and fiendish stare, upon the King's daughter. And as he watched them, cold ran in Aja's veins. For her eyes shook, and changed colour, and a horrible smile played on her blue and twitching lips. And she looked thin, for her two arms hung down tight against her sides, and her fingers opened and shut, slowly, as if of their own accord.

And after a while, she spoke. And she turned to Aja, and said, in a voice that resembled a hiss: Fool! thou wouldst not take the blue flower I offered thee, though its fragrance could not have been matched by anything in the three worlds. Now, then, I will

take another way. So as he watched her, she was gone: and he saw before him nothing but the empty city wall.

And as he looked again, not crediting the testimony of his own eyes, he heard a sharp cry from the King's daughter. And he turned, and saw Yashowatí sinking to the ground. And at that very moment Nata-bhrúkutí stood again before him. And she looked at him with strange eyes, and said slowly: Go now, and enjoy thy wife. But I must give thee just one kiss, before I go.

And as Aja looked into her eyes, suddenly, like a flash of lightning, he understood. And he struck his hand upon his brow, exclaiming: Ha! Now, now, I understand, too late. Thou art that very she, that was jealous of the King's daughter's beauty, and ruined her out of spite. And I have been befooled by thee, and failed to stand the test. And he ground his teeth with rage, that swept through him like a storm. And he said to himself: Alas! I threw away my sword. No matter. Now, then, as she said herself, I will take another way.

And he looked at her, as she stood waiting. And he held out his arms, saying: Come, then. And as she put her face close to his own, he caught her by her slender throat, with both hands, in a grip like that of death.

And then lo! she was gone again. But in her place, he held in his grasp a huge yellow snake, which struck him, as he clutched it hard, once and twice, upon the lips.

